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THE
PUPPET
SHOW
BY MARTIN ARMSTRONG



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THE AUTHOR & THE CRITICS

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THE AUTHOR & THE CRITICS

A STUDY IN SYMBOLISM

THREE FLOURISHED ONCE IN ALEPPO A literary society consisting of seven old gentlemen whose custom it was to meet fortnightly to read and interpret the writings of the learned. And at one of such meetings the President stood up and read out the following story, called *The Garden of Noureddin Ali*.

“There lived once in the town of Moussoul a young gentleman called Noureddin Ali, the happy possessor of great beauty, great accomplishments and great wealth. And when he was come of age his tutors said to him, “Sir, you have now arrived at man’s estate and you have learnt from us all there is to be learnt. Go forth, therefore, choose carefully a wife not less beautiful than yourself, and live happily ever afterwards.”

‘Hearing this, Noureddin Ali went forth and chose for himself a maiden called Fatima, lovely as the harvest moon, and he bought himself a house set in a little rose-garden in which to live happily ever afterwards. But when he had lived there three or four years he became discontented, for, as he said, the place was not worthy of the extreme beauty of his Fatima. Wherefore they packed up, and himself and Fatima, followed by twenty camels, twenty dromedaries and all their retinue, went forth to find a more suitable home. And, having wandered up and down the land for three months, they came to a garden of such beauty that, after careful and detailed consideration, Noureddin exclaimed, “It is not unworthy of my Fatima.” And, having so exclaimed, he purchased it out of hand.

‘But at the end of two years Noureddin, having by this time found leisure to examine the place in greater detail, called

together his household and said, "I have never been ashamed of confessing to a mistake. This morning I discovered in the garden a malformed rosebud, so that this place is, unfortunately, very far from being worthy of my Fatima." So again they packed up and wandered for six months.

'But at the end of the six months they came to a garden of incomparable loveliness, for the place lay cool under a branching roof of roses, and the soft hushing of innumerable fountains soothed the air. And Noureddin, after profound and accurate comparison, exclaimed: "The place is undoubtedly and incontrovertibly worthy of my Fatima." And they unpacked and entered into possession.

'But at the end of one year and a half Noureddin, having attained to the wisdom of years, perceived the folly of this decision. "No one," said he, "is infallible save Allah alone. What could have led me to suppose that this place is worthy of my Fatima." So with a sigh the slaves packed up again and they were wanderers upon the face of the earth for nigh on a year.

'And things continued thus with greater and greater frequency until Noureddin Ali and his Fatima had reached the age of sixty years, at which date Fatima died, worn out by excessive travelling. But this event, so far from settling the question, only complicated it, for Noureddin found it more difficult to discover a garden worthy of the memory of his Fatima than it had been to discover one comparable with that lady herself. So that he continued to wander from place to place, and with such rapidity that now, whenever he bought a new home, the slaves considered it inexpedient to unpack, "for," they said, "we shall be off again in the morning."

'But one day, when Noureddin Ali had achieved his ninetieth year, they came upon the garden which he had at first bought when in the bloom of youth he had led home his bride. And when he saw it he said: "Here, finally and irrevocably, is the garden worthy of the memory of my Fatima. Here, then, will I remain and live happily ever afterwards."

'Unfortunately, however, he had made a small miscalculation, for, worn out by excessive travelling, he died that night.'

As the President resumed his seat, a buzz of conversation arose among which were heard such remarks as these: 'What an optimist! . . What a pessimist! . . Pure idealism! . . Rank materialism!'

After allowing the buzz to continue for five minutes, the President called for silence and said, 'Gentlemen, following our usual procedure, I will now ask each member in alphabetical order to give us his interpretation of the story. I will call upon Mr. Agib to begin.'

Mr. Agib, who was a little dry schoolmaster, began as follows:

'The key to this most instructive story undoubtedly lies in the words spoken by the tutors: "Sir, you have learnt from us all there is to learn." Considering the story in the light of this quotation, we see at once that it is nothing but an educational satire. We see Noureddin Ali, fresh from the hands of his tutors, falling into those very misfortunes and errors which it is the function of education to avert. For what is the object of education but to impart the secret of true happiness, to develop the mind so that it shall sail an orderly and peaceful course among the troubles and difficulties of life and not drift incoherently after vague or unattainable desires? The end of the story, I think, puts my interpretation beyond all doubt, for it satirically shows Noureddin at ninety years of age, at length on the point of finding a happiness which was within his reach at the age of twenty-one.'

Mr. Agib having resumed his seat amid much applause, Mr. Bedreddin next rose. He was a gentleman of a mystical turn of mind, and was interested in hierarchies and cycles—not bicycles nor tricycles, but mystic cycles. 'I think,' he said, 'that our learned friend in his most interesting remarks does not lay sufficient stress on the obviously symbolical aspect of the story. He very rightly draws attention to the closing episode in which Noureddin Ali returns to the original garden, but when he states that the happiness which he there found was accessible to him when in early manhood he first bought the garden, I am convinced that Mr.

Agib has entirely missed the significance of this passage. I maintain that it is impossible, gentlemen, that Noureddin should in the first instance have found happiness there. It is of the very essence of this subtly mystical tale that Noureddin should be unhappy in his first experience of the garden and happy in his second; that he should inevitably complete the cycle of discontent, of search, of aspiration if you will, in order to bring with him on his second visit the soul-development involved in completing that cycle without which true happiness was impossible. And the fact that he is made to die upon the achievement of happiness in that cycle signifies that he then enters on a higher plane of existence, there to begin another cycle. It is also perhaps worth while to point out that the beautiful Fatima is undoubtedly a symbol for the Spirit.'

The next speaker was Mr. Douban, a well-known dilettante.

'We have all, I am sure,' he began, 'been most interested by Mr. Agib's and Mr. Bedreddin's highly ingenious expositions, but personally I fail to see why a utilitarian or doctrinal significance should be thrust upon a simple and charming story. It is always easy to weave tracts and sermons out of the plainest text, but, in my opinion, the only teaching which can be legitimately extracted from the story is that we should enjoy ourselves in the present and not search the future for problematical and elusive pleasures which we may never find.'

Mr. Giafar was the fourth speaker—a hard, incisive old man with no imagination and, as he said, no illusions.

'I agree with Mr. Douban,' he said, 'as far as he goes, but he seems to have ignored the subtle irony and keen observation revealed by the writer of the story. We are shown a man, restless and neurotic, never content because he will never face realities, but must always be mooning after the vague fictions of a disordered fancy. He is a selfish man and, like all selfish persons, he attempts to give unselfish reasons for his selfish actions. With a fine irony the pretext for his restless wanderings is made to be a desire to find a worthy frame for his wife's beauty; and this pretext is beautifully exposed by the fact that he sacrifices his wife's

life in his pursuit of it, upon which we have the instant substitution of the even more fantastic pretext of the sanctity of the wife's memory. Finally, a stroke of masterly realism shows us the egoist in the weakness and degeneration of senility, pathetically accepting and submitting to what he had scorned when his faculties were still unimpaired. The story is a fine piece of mordant realism.'

Mr. Giafar's sinister speech created a profound sensation, which, however, was soon dispelled by the next speaker, a jolly red-faced squire called Hassan. Rising from his seat, he smiled jocularly on the company and remarked:

'Gentlemen, I am a plain man, and I flatter myself I can understand a plain story. This is nothing more or less than a perfectly straightforward account of a fellow who had some difficulty in getting a place to suit him, and when he did get one he unfortunately died before he got thoroughly settled in. Exactly the same thing happened to my uncle Mohammed.' Having so said, Mr. Hassan sat down amid hearty cheers.

The last to speak was the philosopher and psychologist Schem-seddin. 'I have been much interested,' he said, 'in the self-revealing interpretations of our friends here present. The story, however, is merely the expression in popular form of two philosophic truths. It illustrates the idea that life in all its forms must be regarded not as a *being*, but as a *becoming*, for the very condition of life is ceaseless change. With this idea the writer has ingeniously incorporated that other enunciated by a Western sage "Les idées très simples," wrote the sage, "ne sont à la portée que des esprits très compliqués." In other words, appreciation of the first garden, as we saw, was not possible before the completion of a lifelong mental apprenticeship. Everyone, I am sure, will applaud the writer in thus placing within reach of the ordinary reading public important philosophic ideas such as these.'

When the last speaker had finished, the President arose. 'Gentlemen,' he said, 'I think you will all agree that never before have we had such various and conflicting views expressed with regard to a single work of art. Indeed so conflicting are they that

it is quite impossible for me to sum up the individual expositions and extract, as we usually do, the general conclusions. I propose, therefore, that we invite the talented author of the story to our next meeting with the object of learning from him the correct interpretation.'

This suggestion was received with unanimous approval and the matter was arranged.

At the following meeting the President, after introducing the talented author, addressed him as follows:—

'Sir, your well-known and fascinating story, *The Garden of Noureddin Ali*, which was read and discussed at our last meeting, has been the subject of great diversity of opinion. I shall therefore, if you will permit me, read you the interpretations of each of our members, and then I shall ask you to be so good as to tell us which one is right.'

The President then read all the interpretations and, turning to the talented author, he requested him to indicate the correct one.

'They are all correct,' replied the talented author.

This unexpected reply somewhat nonplussed the assembly, but happily the President rose to the occasion. 'Perhaps,' he said, 'I should rather have asked you which of the interpretations you yourself had in mind when composing the story.'

'None of them,' replied the talented author.

BIOGRAPHY

B I O G R A P H Y

A STUDY IN CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE

JOHN CAMPION FOLLOWED THE HOTEL porter up the stairs which seemed almost pitch dark after the white glare of the piazza. The porter unlocked a door, ushered Campion into a bedroom, deposited his bag upon a wooden stand, and departed, closing the door behind him.

Campion went to the window and opened the green shutters. Dazzling autumn sunshine flooded the room and, looking out, he received the sudden impression that he was standing on the brink of a precipice, for, sheer below his window, the plain, covered with miniature vineyards, miniature fields, miniature trees, and streaked by miniature roads like chalk-lines on a slate, spread far and wide, curving at last into a wall of violet hills which rose peak above peak like wavecrests on a windy sea.

The room looked cool and spacious with its high, elaborately-painted ceiling, smooth white sheets and pillows, and a pleasing profusion of clean towels. He could detect only one fault: the servant had omitted to sweep the empty hearth into which his predecessor had thrown a quantity of tobacco-ash and several cigar-ends. He dropped into an easy-chair, feeling suddenly that he was very tired. His heart had been troubling him again in the train, and he reflected that he had been foolish to carry his bag to the station that morning.

Campion was a man of few friends. No one of his eminence ever kept himself more aloof from his contemporaries. To the public he was known by his books only: every detail of his life and habits and even his personal appearance were wrapped in complete mystery. A hatred of tobacco and a perfect irresponsiveness to music were among the characteristics of a temperament pharisaic, fastidious and cynical, which, in his work,

revealed itself in a terse, mordant style, a vehicle for sharp definition, exact criticism, pungent wit, and a scepticism which delighted in playing havoc among the conventionally religious.

When he had sufficiently rested, Campion proceeded to unpack. His opened suit-case displayed perfection in the art of packing, and as he carefully removed each article from its place in the bag, he disposed it with extreme exactitude in its appointed place in drawer or cupboard. Three or four paper-backed books were placed symmetrically on a table near the bed. Between finger and thumb he lifted from the bag a bundle of long Italian cigars, sniffed them with an expression of disgusted curiosity, and placed them in a drawer. The next article to be unpacked was a Bible, newly bound in an elaborately tooled Florentine binding. Campion opened it. The inside was much used: there were pencillings here and there and on a loose sheet of paper were various references headed 'Helpful Texts.' With a contemptuous shrug Campion placed it in the drawer beside the cigars and removed from the bag a large, thin volume on which the title 'Beethoven's Sonatas' was printed in gold. He opened the volume and glanced uncomprehendingly at the musical notation.

When all had been thus unpacked and disposed as precisely and impeccably as one of his own essays, Campion took a writing-case from a drawer and proceeded to write a letter. *I arrived here an hour ago, he wrote, and after four days here I shall start for England. I have already executed all your commissions. Your fifty abominable cigars are bought and have already impregnated all my linen with their disgusting stench. While in Florence I had your wife's Bible bound according to her orders with the result that it now looks as inviting as a novel by D'Annunzio. By the way, I found inside it a loose half-sheet of prescriptions (for spiritual consumption only) which I have preserved. When at Assisi yesterday I acquired a sort of Christmas Card containing a leaf from one of St. Francis's miraculous rose-trees. There is a printed guarantee to the effect that excellent results will be obtained from the leaf if used with faith. I have enclosed it in the Bible. For myself, I prefer the old-fashioned*

mustard-leaf which is equally efficacious with or without faith, since it produces rapid conviction by certain compelling properties of its own. When in Florence I happened to pick up a volume of Beethoven's Sonatas, copiously annotated in pencil by a certain Rubinstein. The acquaintance who pointed it out to me assured me that Rubinstein was a famous pianist and that the volume was something of a curiosity. I am therefore bringing it home for Muriel on the strict understanding that she refrains from playing the contents while I am in the house. Thanks for your list of younger Italian writers. Obedient to your exhortations, I have bought a volume or two of Papini and some others. Papini's *Un Uomo Finito*, which I shall finish in bed to-night, I find extremely tedious. The feverish veriosity tires and the entire lack of restraint sickens me. I have so far found no one to my taste among these younger Italians.

Having addressed and stamped this letter, Campion posted it in the hall as he went down to dinner. At dinner he found himself sharing a table with the only other Englishman in the hotel, a well-informed fellow and a good talker. Campion liked him, and after dinner they continued their conversation over coffee in the lounge. But Campion's heart was bothering him again. Clearly, he told himself, slightly scared, he ought not to have carried his bag to the station that morning. He would have to take it easy during the next few days. He rose heavily from his chair and, ordering his *café-au-lait* for ten next morning, went slowly and carefully up to bed.

In his bedroom he saw the Italian books on the table near the bed, *Un Uomo Finito* on top of the rest. The thought of them filled him with weariness and depression. He could certainly not stand any of that blustering stuff tonight, but he would have his notebook and pencil near him in case of sleeplessness. But the notebook could not be found. He did not even remember unpacking it. Campion invariably folded the notebook inside some article of clothing: he had done so that morning when packing, and at once he realised that it must now be in one of the drawers, still wrapped in clothes. The first drawer that he tried to open stuck,

the struggle involved in opening it irritated him, and when he got it open he did not find the notebook. These occurrences repeated themselves in the case of the second drawer and Campion, losing all patience, pursued a frenzied and unsuccessful search through both, leaving the contents in wild confusion. As they had refused to open, so both drawers refused to shut, and it was only after reproducing a stage thunderstorm that he succeeded in closing them. He undressed, feeling breathless and upset, and as he unfolded his pyjamas the notebook fell out of the jacket. In stooping to pick it up he noticed that the cigar-ends still lay in the empty fireplace. How disgusting! Feeling very ill-tempered, he got into bed and switched out the light

When the waiter knocked at the door the next morning with the *café-au-lait* Campion did not reply. The waiter entered and put down the tray on the table near the bed. The English gentleman was asleep. In the twilight of the shuttered room the waiter could see the motionless hands and face and the disordered bed-clothes. He went to the window and opened the shutters. When he turned again towards the bed the waiter received a shock, for the English gentleman was not asleep, but dead. The fact was immediately, appallingly obvious. The waiter glanced hurriedly at the dressing-table, helped himself to a couple of gold studs, and left the room, locking the door after him.

When the necessary investigations were made it was thought best that the other Englishman in the hotel should be present. It was only after a considerable search among Campion's effects that his identity was eventually established.

In England the news of Campion's death produced those results which always follow the death of an eminent writer. Monthly and weekly publications and those dailies with literary pretensions printed critical articles, more or less detailed, about Campion's work. Here and there a few rare personal reminiscences appeared, and that other Englishman who had seen Campion both alive and dead in the Italian hotel where he died was pressed to contribute his experiences. So little was known of Campion himself, it was

pointed out, that it became the duty of everyone who had anything to tell about the great man to tell it. The Englishman, thus exhorted, contributed his experiences. After describing his dinner and subsequent conversation with Campion, the Englishman continued as follows:

It may seem strange that one who had known Campion for not more than two hours should presume to write about his life and habits, but the fact that it was my melancholy duty to be present at the inspection of his personal belongings an hour after his death and in the room where he still lay as he had died, made it possible for me, by reason of this sudden intimate dip into his privacy, to learn a few details not perhaps generally known concerning his tastes and habits.

Like many people of artistic temperament, Campion was desperately untidy. His clothing was flung pell-mell into drawers in a disorder which one would almost have said was deliberate. As I have already stated, Campion did not smoke after our dinner together, so that I was a little surprised to discover that he was an inveterate smoker. In his bedroom, cigar-ash and several cigar-ends lay in the grate and on the table was a bundle of at least fifty Toscani.

It will surprise those familiar with his writings to learn that actually Campion was an intensely religious man. He carried with him on his travels a Bible which gave evidence of continual use: many verses were pencil-marked and a carefully-written list of references headed 'Helpful Texts' appeared on a loose sheet in the book. The Bible was evidently one of his most cherished possessions, for it had recently been rebound in an expensive Florentine binding. Enclosed in it was an illuminated card from the church of the Porziuncula, doubtless brought by him from Assisi on the day of his death.

Campion was an enthusiastic student of modern Italian literature. By his bed were found two books by Giovanni Papini, whose novel *Un Uomo Finito* he was reading at the time of his death. Inside this book, marking the page he had reached, was a long list of other Italian writers of the younger school.

No one would suspect from his books that Campion was a keen musician. Yet among his luggage he carried a volume of Beethoven's Sonatas

which gave evidence, like the Bible, of much use and was, moreover, copiously annotated in pencil. Whether these notes were his own or those of a music-master, the fact remains that he had made a close study of the Sonatas of the greatest of musicians.

It is facts like these which remind us once more how rash it is to attempt to deduce too literally a writer's personality from his writings, showing us, as they do, how large a portion of an artist's character may be entirely unapparent in his art. . . .

Perhaps none of Campion's new friends ever saw this interesting fragment; at least they never publicly commented on it: and when, some years later, a well-known writer was compiling what is now the standard biography of John Campion, the details of this article, in view of the extraordinary scarcity of information relating to the man, as distinguished from the writer, proved to be of inestimable value.

THE EMIGRANTS

T H E E M I G R A N T S

THE HUGE GLASS-ROOFED TUNNEL OF THE station was full of a yellowish grey mist. The slim pillars looked as unreal as shadows and the long perspective of waiting trains and the waiting travellers crowded along the platforms appeared dwarfed and mean under that vast and gloomy vault which yawned emptily above them. On the grey stone pavements black patches of wetness showed where the rain kept dripping through the roof. Some of the trains had a deep layer of snow heaped upon their tops and from under the carriages steam from the heating-apparatus loomed thickly up through the damp air as though the train, like a racehorse after a race, stood breathless and sweating from its wild course through an unknown stormy country. That snow and the steam with its warm smell suggested all the vague romance of travel: the bright warmth of carriages, the desolation of mountain-tops cold under a grey twilight, the endless monotony of snow-covered plains. They were symbols of change, escape, an unknown adventure, alluring, disturbing, terrible.

The end of the station, the end opening on the world, was closed by a screen of vertical rain stretched upon a flat and tarnished sky: beneath, a medley of low roofs, shapes of grey mist and grey snow, crouched together in the misery of wetness.

A crowd of indistinguishable figures blackened for its entire length one of the long platforms, a platform still without its train. Huddled together there, listlessly expectant, they seemed, in their patience and helplessness, more like a herd of sheep. These folk, a miscellaneous collection from every part of the

country, had been waiting there already for two hours and as they waited rumours spread and died among them. Sometimes it was said that a bridge had collapsed and that the train would not start till tomorrow: another rumour said that the train would be in at any moment and another that the train would start, but not for another hour. Meanwhile the hollow station became more and more dull and chilly as dreary day faded imperceptibly into comfortless evening. Lights began to appear here and there hung invisibly under the murky roof: red and green lights showed in the confused twilight outside: the station became a huge, damp cavern.

That waiting human herd, emigrants who had just left their homes for years, perhaps for ever, had split itself into little groups. Some stood in small circles, talking, arguing, holding out explanatory hands, breaking suddenly into violent gesture: others, having built their luggage into a mound, sat about the edges of it, chattering, shouting to children, bursting into rapid quarrels, dropping into sudden weary silences. The herd was made up of individuals of every age. There were faces old and seamed like shrivelled parchment, young faces of delicate fairness or dusky brown or richly bronzed by a southern sun: faces handsome and plain: beautiful faces sullen with discontent or grim with malevolence: ugly faces made beautiful by serenity, patience, good-humour: and faces so commonplace, so neutral, that it seemed as if no stress of circumstance could make them interesting.

From time to time a figure would detach itself from its group and move to the edge of the platform to gaze wistfully up the line where sometimes out of the dimness at the end of the station a sudden vision of moving lights would swim into view or the black mass of an engine would materialize and loom slowly larger. Then a ripple of movement, an eager expectation, would become evident in the inert mass on the platform: those sitting would scramble to their feet, baggage would be shouldered and the crowd would press forward to the edge of the platform: but the advancing engine always veered off to the right or left and

the crowd would settle wearily and hopelessly back into stagnation. To many of them this return to stagnation seemed almost a relief, because it brought a respite, after the exhausting strain of breaking with the familiar life of the past, from the exhausting strain of pressing forward into an unknown future. Thus after each disappointment they sank back into what would have seemed apathy, even contentment, had not the silence which followed revealed depths of weariness and discouragement.

When at last the train loomed grimly into sight, no one moved. They were disillusioned by so many disappointments: waiting had become a habit. Only when the engine thundered down the long platform did a simultaneous clamour break from that listless crowd, stirred throughout its length, like an ants' nest scattered by a spade, with the quiverings of an infinite agitation. Now while the train was still moving in, lithe forms leapt like monkeys on to the footboards and clung to the door-handles, and when it stopped the whole gang flung itself precipitately forward, fighting and struggling up into the nearest carriages. There was a wild perspective of swinging doors, clutching arms, luggage flung and hoisted upwards. Old people and children were being pushed from below and hauled from above by those who had already climbed up: others who had deposited their luggage struggled to get out through the crowd that struggled to get in. Angry faces, laughing faces, brutal faces, faces tragic and tormented, were seen and lost and seen again in a tumult of smoke and lamplight.

When the train started, every carriage was crowded to the uttermost. Luggage of every shape and kind was heaped on to the racks: there was luggage on the floor. Those who had been lucky enough to secure seats had baskets and bundles on their knees. The rest stood with their legs wedged among the knees of those sitting and the luggage on the floor, and kept their balance by holding on to the racks or on to one another.

The company, having settled itself down, broke into cheerful talk. There was a general feeling of relief, almost of exhilaration. After all those rumours and misgivings the train had actually

arrived, they were all actually in the train, and now they were on their way and had only to sit or stand still, resigning themselves and thinking of nothing, while the train moved forward into the unknown future. In the release from the vague tension and anxiety of waiting, in the soothing knowledge that they were now mere passive flotsam on the stream of events and that thought and effort were for a while unnecessary, their spirits rose and they chattered and argued, the gusts of talk rising and falling from the short clear phrase of a single voice to a clamourous babel in which everyone talked at once. Their talk was not conversation, it was the singing of birds, for everyone wished to talk, no one to listen, except when somebody spoke of the land of their destination and disturbed in each mind the half-sleeping ache to know something certain about the mysterious goal which they half desired and half feared. Then only silence fell and all listened to the speaker.

A dim lamp burned in the roof of the carriage. Outside, night had fallen: unrecognizable shapes, black and grey, starred with rare lights, moved vaguely past the window panes. At intervals, the train stopped at a wayside station and in the dead silence which possessed that snow-covered waste, the monotonous and persistent crepitation of rain on the roof made the dryness and warmth of each carriage seem homely and desirable. Someone cleared a patch with his sleeve on the misty pane and revealed a row of white railings, a single dreary gas-lamp, and a low hovel thatched with snow, the line of its eaves glittering with a bright row of raindrops which swelled and dropped in rapid succession.

Each halt seemed longer than than the last: each start more laborious, preluded by the same leisurely routine, the dark shape swinging a lantern past the window, the whistle, the distant railway horn, and the remote answer from the engine as the train lurched creaking into motion again.

After many of such halts there came one of interminable length. Those tired travellers had long since sunk into an apathetic silence: some slept collapsed forward on themselves with helpless heads and arms: some stared with glassy eyes at the lamp: those standing

seemed to hang limply, dark shapes suspended from the ceiling. But now by degrees they came to themselves, disturbed, it seemed, by the fact that the train was no longer moving. Throughout the train they roused themselves, stared vacantly, wearily recognized their surroundings. The sensation spread that an immense interval of time had elapsed and that now time had come to a standstill. What hour of the night or morning could it be? The rain was still playing its endless tattoo on the roof and across the noise of it were heard the slow pants of the engine. It panted like a thing exhausted: it sounded as if it could never again move the huge inertia of the train. Then came sounds of windows opening as inquisitiveness began to stir those wanderers burdened by the emotions of the past day, the hopelessness of an immovable present, the undefined threat of a vague future. As the windows fell, a flood of cold air invaded the foul atmosphere of the carriages. The train stood on a high embankment. Beneath it lay a desert of grey snow. Like a vertical warp of grey strings, the rain oscillated before the square of open window. Once more rumours spread and died among the herd. The engine had broken down and they were waiting for another. The signals were against them. That bridge, rumoured of before, had been damaged by floods: it was impossible. This rumour was confirmed by a dripping official who passed with a lantern: but still nothing happened and another hour went by. The herd had sunk back once again into weary unconsciousness when a voice out of the darkness proclaimed that everyone was to get out. The bridge must be crossed on foot. 'All change. All change,' wailed the voice, and the words spread a sensation of foreboding and despair among those unhappy slaves of circumstance.

At once every carriage became the scene of a feverish energy: sleepers, suddenly roused, sprang to their feet: luggage was torn down from racks: doors were kicked open, and each carriage vomited its struggling crowd and its load of luggage into the night. Outside, all was dark vacuity. The air was full of hissing water. Cowering shapes which had clambered half-asleep from the high

carriages, stood for a moment lost and helpless in the blackness, their feet sunk into a mess of melting snow, their heads and shrinking shoulders bowed beneath the vertical onslaught of the rain. Then, following the drift of running figures felt rather than seen in the darkness, they hurried along the interminable length of the train.

When the towering mass of the engine had been passed, a great conflagration of ruddy flares leapt suddenly into view far in front, firing with red lustre the polished length of railway-lines before them, whose parallel gleams guided their stumbling course. A confusion of hurrying figures struggling under every kind of burden flickered in violent silhouette against this lurid background. The clatter of the loose stones of the railway-track, the rustle of drifted snow kicked up or trodden down by blundering feet, the heavy breathing of strained and overloaded bodies, the shouts of those who had lost their companions in the rush, all sounded dulled and remote through the steady hush of the rain: and as the straggling line of ghosts drew nearer to the flares, another sound added itself to these,—gentle, remote, but more penetrating, the soft aerial hissing of a torrent somewhere deep down in the night, fading sometimes to the faintest sigh, swelling again to the soft hiss of a slow wind among poplar-leaves. At the same time a chill sense of depth and empty space pervaded the night. They had reached the broken bridge.

The blinding glow of the flares now showed as a vast cave of fire hollowed out of the darkness, and as the foremost figures entered it and staggered forward, the straggling procession grew rapidly into a grotesque dance of scarlet devils, slashed with rapid black shadows which rushed forward after them out of the night and capered wildly across the line of march.

Pitched high in the air between two darknesses, they crossed the lurid roadway of the bridge. Beneath their feet the snow gleamed like burning lava: the rain flashed among them like drops of fire. On their left, behind a barricade of scaffold-poles, a ragged edge of broken parapet showed where half the bridge

had fallen away into the gorge below. Here some, at the end of their strength, set down their loads and stopped to rest a moment in the glare. The breath puffed from their mouths and encircled their heads with a crimson mist: water dripped from their hat-brims: their soaked and streaming shoulders gleamed like satin.

At the other side of the bridge, far up the line beyond the influence of that blaze, appeared the faint lights of another train which had brought its load of passengers from the frontier and was now waiting to receive the emigrants. Slowly they moved towards it, a straggling line of hunched and flagging figures that seemed like fugitives from some terrible disaster. Moving to meet them from this train, the passengers who had just alighted from it hurried forward through the downpour, laden, like the emigrants, with every kind of luggage: and soon those two tides met and flowed together, a medley of dark shapes pushing and jostling each other, each intent on urging itself forward.

When the main body of emigrants reached the train, the struggle of boarding the carriages repeated itself, but now it was fiercer and more desperate as the herd was more apprehensive and more exhausted. Soon every carriage contained a mass of humanity and baggage inextricably wedged together: but the train was much smaller than the one they had left and crowds still remained outside, wandering hopelessly up and down the length of the train, seeking in vain for room. The air was full of the shouts of men who had lost their womenfolk, the sobs of women, the weary crying of children. The sound rose and fell, ceaseless and expressionless, like the bleating of driven sheep. Some of them wandered desperately to and fro without even trying to find places: it seemed as if they had forgotten in their misery what they were looking for. There was a woman who opened the same door time after time, chanting the same monotonous supplication. 'Let me in. For God's sake let me in,' she wailed. The carriage was crammed, visibly there was not room for the smallest child. At first those in the carriage took no notice of the woman. Human feelings, pity, sympathy, common charity,

as always happens in desperate straits, had exhausted themselves long since: the primitive instinct of self-preservation alone remained. It was a case of every man for himself. They heard the woman crying, they heard the crying of all those drenched and helpless folk outside, and while their minds told them that the thing was tragic, their emotions told them nothing at all: they were tired out, they had ceased to function. So no one took any notice of the woman until her persistence made them angry. 'Let me in. For God's sake, let me in,' wailed the voice. It was like the cry of a beggar, a cry that seems to expect no response, that from long habit hardly realizes what it is asking for, yet persists in asking. Then exclamations of impatience were heard in the carriage. 'There's no room,' shouted someone. 'Can't you see there's no room?' But the woman continued her chant as though nobody had spoken. 'Let me in. For God's sake, let me in.' The voice sounded weak and listless, but the moment a hand from within tried to shut the door, the woman, with an action in startling contrast to her voice, clutched it and held it open with fierce determination. 'Damn it all,' shouted the voice, 'can't the woman see we're jammed like bloody sardines?' 'Let me in. For God's sake, let me in,' answered the exasperating chant. 'I've lost my baby and the old man . . . the poor old man.' People looked at one another indignantly with gestures of despair. What could one do with such stupidity? 'Let her in,' said another voice in the carriage, and, strangely enough, it echoed the general feeling. They did not pity her. They hated her with her lost baby and her miserable old man, but for some reason they must let her in.

As they hauled her up, her fat red face appeared in the doorway, a face bloated with weeping and streaming with rain and tears. The flabby chin shook with sobs. On one arm she carried a basket covered with a white cloth. They hoisted her up like a limp and swollen sack and forced her into the centre of the already overflowing carriage where someone gave her a seat. A ruffian lolling in the place next to her, whose face wore an

unchanging expression of dark malevolence, stared at her with sullen disgust.

Once in the carriage, the woman let her emotions go. She sobbed and blubbered: the tears streamed down her ugly, swollen face and fell on to her basket: she described in broken phrases and with a wealth of florid gesture how she had lost the child and the old man . . . the poor old man. She pressed her fat hands despairingly to her wide, loose bosom or flung them out appealingly before her. Her despair was disgusting, as every exhibition of unrestrained emotion is disgusting. Some of the travellers tried to reassure her. They maintained that it was impossible for even a baby to be lost, that the train would not start till everyone was safely on board. 'But the old man,' she snivelled. 'He's quite helpless. He may have fallen down the embankment. He's sure to get lost.'

A correctly dressed commercial traveller laughed at such an idea. 'Look here, missus,' he said: 'I know every inch of this line. There are lots of officials looking after this train, seeing that all the luggage is brought over, and that everyone gets a place. It's impossible for anyone to get lost.' From his account they were all travelling in the greatest luxury, watched over by the most solicitous care. This surprising perversion of facts seemed to comfort the woman. She became silent and dried her eyes on an exceedingly dirty pocket-handkerchief.

But at her silence the continual crying outside became once more audible and she soon broke out afresh. 'It's my Linda,' she sobbed. 'I can hear her. I recognise her voice. Let me get to the window. O, please, please.' She struggled up from her seat, treading on the foot of a respectably dressed young woman who swore fiercely and glared at her with intense hatred. People muttered angrily, 'You can't get to the window. Sit down. Damn it, we've let you in here: isn't that enough?' But again the woman had her will. Stumbling and floundering, regardless of others, she forced her way through tightly jammed legs and knees to the window. Two young sailors stood wedged in the

middle of the carriage. One of them with a comprehensive wink summed up the situation in an astonishing flow of obscenity. Some people sniggered: others looked shocked: many rejoiced secretly at his smooth fluency, prepossessed by his jolly young face and the good-natured and airy recklessness of his manner.

The woman leaned out, calling the child's name into the streaming darkness. The child was not there, but, as ill luck would have it, just as she was drawing in her head she spotted the old man. There he was, God bless him, right under the window, looking up out of the rain.

'There he is,' she sobbed. 'There he is, poor old boy,' and she made frantic efforts to open the door. But at this the whole carriage rose in revolt. 'He's not coming in here,' they growled: 'not likely. We're not having any old man in here.' Instantly the woman broke into a torrent of supplication, disgusting, excessive, irresistible. 'O, please, please: for God's sake: the poor old man: he's halfdead. You can't leave a poor old man out in the rain.'

Already the door was open and unseen hands were pushing the old man up. His white, agonized face appeared, the protruding eyes blinded by rain, the limp moustache full of water. He clung desperately with weak and helpless arms: his legs appeared to be half paralysed. It seemed as if he would fall headlong backwards into the darkness. Again those in the carriage felt themselves forced to accept the situation. They accepted it resignedly, without pity. As they hauled him up, the old man yelled with pain. 'Wait, wait a minute. My knee. O God, my knee. My foot, O ... h!' At last they got him in, someone resigned a seat to him, and, after incredible congestion, they dropped him exhausted beside the woman. He was a horrible, helpless old man with an unhealthy putty-coloured face and the pathetic, drooping moustaches of a seal. He brought into the foul air of the carriage a sickening stench like sour dough.

A silence of physical and emotional weariness fell upon the company: each individual seemed to be concentrating his remaining energies on mere endurance. The young sailors alone

appeared undismayed and serene. To them the whole affair seemed to be a pleasant and diverting holiday.

The rain drummed on the roof: a wailing came from the darkness, and in the carriage the woman fretted incessantly for her lost child, disturbing the whole sleep-burdened company. A storm of exasperated protest arose, above which the cheery voice of the young sailor was heard. 'Listen here, ma,' he said: 'tell us your name and we'll go and enquire for the nipper:' and he and his mate began to climb like monkeys among the passengers, swinging themselves by luggage-racks and hooks till, one after the other, they slid sinously out of the window.

Before long, to the general astonishment, they returned with the baby. The woman seized it in an ecstasy of tenderness and smothered it in kisses. She stroked its face and head, she crooned endearments over it, she wept and laughed and blew her nose. Her joy was as excessive as her other emotions. The baby seemed stupefied by this unwonted treatment: it wore the permanently amazed expression of a painted doll.

Suddenly the train started with a violent jolt and the everlasting journey was resumed. Once more the long drumming of the rain on the roof gave place to the long monotonous rumble of rolling wheels. Once again each cramped and aching carriage-load dropped with tousled hair and burning cheeks into uneasy slumber. Those that stood, trying wearily to lean their nodding heads against the arms with which they grasped the racks, drooped uncontrollably into fitful dozes. The woman and the baby alone remained awake. She was feeding it with grapes out of her basket. She burst each grape, removed the pips with dirty fingers, and pressed it into the baby's mouth. After a while the baby choked and vomited up a mouthful which she received into the handkerchief which had already received so much. The woman's face was transformed. All traces of the weeping had vanished: her complexion was clear and healthy: her face, in its tender solicitude for the child, was beautiful. Finally they too fell a prey to weariness and the infected air of the carriage.

In the dim lamplight, the carriage looked like a cave full of dead,—dead with drooping heads and strained necks, dead with hanging hands and grotesquely-protruding knees, bodies fallen forward on themselves as though fumbling for something on the floor, bodies hung limply from a roof composed of luggage piled on luggage. The tightly-closed windows were thick with steam, human breath condensed on the roof and fell in heavy drops on the sleepers, the hot air was fetid with the stench of rain-soaked clothing and unclean humanity.

Hours went by and no one spoke. Asleep or stupified by the filthy atmosphere, mesmerized by the drum drum drum of the wheels, they lay or stood in uneasy attitudes, aching, cramped and broken. Sometimes a body changed its position with a gesture of agonized discomfort, sometimes the rasp of a snore emerged above the thick breathing and rose to a rattle which broke in a stifled gasp. No one awoke now when the train stopped: relaxed and sprawling bodies were jerked spasmodically but not awakened by the jolt of restarting. The roar of tunnels, the cold swish of pine forests, the hollow racket of rock-walled cuttings, passed over their numbed senses as water over stones. But where noise and motion had been powerless the cold succeeded.

That lifeless, all-pervading chill which takes possession of the world before the dawn, penetrated even those closed windows and doors, numbing the feet and chilling the marrows of those fevered sleepers. The window-panes radiated an intense cold as though they were made not of glass but of ice. One by one the travellers stirred and shivered and opened their eyes upon the pale squallor of the railway carriage. The atmosphere had lost its thick warmth: its nauseating staleness was the more perceptible and the more offensive in this thin, all-searching, death-like frigidity. The lamp burned pale and livid. The black squares of the fogged windows had faded to a wan grey. Outside, snow-covered fields, gaunt skeletons of trees, dim shapes of deserted farms, swam past as on the circumference of a great wheel, unspeakably mournful, unspeakably desolate. It seemed as if the train must never

arrive anywhere but must continue to rush timelessly, infinitely, through that ghastly twilight, across that funereal landscape, to which sunlight, springtime, warmth and colour seemed everlasting unknown. A strange, husky voice spoke and then another. Gradually life came back to the carriage. Some one let down the window: cool air and cool grey light rushed in and instantly everyone realized that the night was over. The light of the lamp no longer penetrated beyond the yellow hemisphere of its globe. People stretched themselves, straightened their clothes, drew themselves up from their sprawling attitudes. They were plunged into a tunnel and the lamp regained its influence: with a roar, the train sloughed off the tunnel and burst out above dim perspectives of rising valleys. Masses of phantasmal mountainside swung across the windows, devoured the view, and were hurled behind them. Lines of gaunt houses rushed upon them, passed in a flash, and receded as though borne away on a whirling torrent. There was a shuddering of breaks. They had reached the frontier.

When the train stopped in the station, the emigrants dismounted without confusion, slowly, leisurely, each waiting his turn. The hollow space of the station was full of the sharp, sweet cleanliness of mountain air. After the dimness and confinement of the carriages everything seemed wide and clear and free. In front of the steaming engine the high arch of the station-roof framed in a wonderful vision of live and glowing colour, warm greys and tawny browns illuminated by great splashes of green and burning yellow. It was a sector of the immense sunlit mountainside bright with the autumnal glory of its climbing larch forests.

And though their long pilgrimage was little more than begun those emigrants were stirred and uplifted, vaguely, sub-consciously, by that triumph of sunlight and colour over the dark obstruction of night, as if by the promise of a great and resplendent future.

THE PUPPET SHOW

T H E P U P P E T S H O W

ALL DAY THEY HAD QUARRELLED ABOUT going for a drive. The whole *pension* knew about it. Not that they quarrelled noisily: indeed, though sometimes verbally and emotionally violent, they never raised their voices above the pitch of perfect refinement. But they kept at it; and at the end of the day none of the guests could say which sister had won, or, in fact, if either had won. Some put their money on Mrs. Ramsden. Mrs. Ramsden had the independence of the married woman: she was heavier, more dignified, with a certain stone-wall quality, an inexpugnability, which Miss Phipps lacked. Miss Phipps, on the other hand, as her backers pointed out, was wiry: she had the keen, monotonous tenacity of the spinster. She was frequently able quite effectually to brush aside Mrs. Ramsden's cold, calm logic by a really impressive pigheadedness, a quality which sometimes strained Mrs. Ramsden's self-control to the extreme limit: for such a method of flooring her marshalled logic was, to Mrs. Ramsden, the poison-gas method, while to Miss Phipps the introduction of logical reasoning was a deliberate obscuring of the issue on Mrs. Ramsden's part. Reasons never meant much to Miss Phipps, nor did she for a moment believe in Mrs. Ramsden's intellectual honesty. In this her intuition was correct: nothing could have been more dishonest than Mrs. Ramsden's parade of reasons, though Mrs. Ramsden herself would have been the last to suspect it.

Yet the thing seemed simple. Miss Phipps had invited Mrs. Ramsden to take a drive to Fiesole. Mrs. Ramsden had refused. There, one would have thought, was the end of it. Take merely the physical side of it. Mrs. Ramsden must have weighed twelve stone; Miss Phipps could not have exceeded seven. By no

conceivable means could Miss Phipps single-handed have got an unwilling Mrs. Ramsden downstairs and into the carriage. The thing was obvious. Yet now it was teatime, and the question had arisen at breakfast. The guests were amazed at such persistence, for they did not see the real magnitude of the thing. They did not see that no fewer than eight persons were at it, hammer and tongs, all talking together, deafening one another, raising such a Babel of opinions and prejudices and hatreds that it seemed as if the Judgment Day alone could end the thing.

They failed to allow for those shadowy Mrs. Ramsdens, two, three and four, standing fierce-eyed and obstructive round the chair of the visible Mrs. Ramsden, or the three ghostly Misses Phipps whose shrill emotion haunted and bewildered the tangible Miss Phipps: a goblin assembly prompting, exasperating, contradicting, deluding, criticizing, pampering, deriding and hating those two respectable middle-aged ladies. 'I love driving,' said a shadowy Mrs. Ramsden. 'There is nothing I should like better than to drive to Fiesole to-morrow, but I will not be patronized by Ellen. Ellen seems to forget that I am a married woman. The whole thing is a great nuisance, because my having to refuse Ellen's invitation makes it impossible for me ever to go for drives here.'

'Augusta is most provoking,' sighed a Phipps ghost. 'Ever since she married she has never allowed me to do anything for her. I like doing things for people. Augusta says she hates driving. That is a lie. But I don't care two straws whether she hates it or likes it. All I want is to *take* her for a drive.'

'Why,' murmured a Mrs. Ramsden and a Miss Phipps in wistful unison, 'why can't they stop these wretched bickerings and let us do as we like? We both love driving and might have such a charming day. We used to be so happy together as girls.'

Another voice emerged. 'I shall go on bothering Augusta and she will go on refusing. If I stop bothering her she will always get the upper hand too easily. Eventually she will probably get the upper hand in any case. Then I shall have that martyred feeling which in some ways is not unpleasant.'

'I hate telling lies,' complained a Mrs. Ramsden, 'yet Ellen makes it necessary for me to keep on pretending I dislike driving. I don't see how it is to end. The thing is getting so wearisomely elaborate. What a nuisance Ellen is! I wish I had never decided to come to Florence with her.'

'You know what the doctor said, Augusta,' remarked the tangible Miss Phipps. 'He said that you required change and gentle exercise. Indeed, he specified driving. It is for your *good* that I wish to take you for a drive.'

Mrs. Ramsden sat impenetrable, a shop with the shutters up. 'The trouble is, Ellen,' she replied in cold, measured tones, 'that, as you know, I dislike driving. I wish you would keep your money for something more useful.'

'I shall do just as I like with my money,' snapped Ellen.

'Except take me for a drive, my dear,' corrected Augusta acidly.

Next morning the Ramsdenites among the guests were triumphant. Not that Mrs. Ramsden had achieved anything spectacular. All that happened was that the two ladies did not go out driving.

At lunch Miss Phipps counter-attacked. 'I think I shall take you into town this afternoon, Augusta,' she said. 'You require exercise and we can look at the shops.'

Mrs. Ramsden was prepared. Half closing her eyes for a moment, as though annoyed by tobacco smoke, she replied: 'I had already decided that we would go into town, dear.'

They left the *pension* at two o'clock. It was not clear whether Miss Phipps was taking Mrs. Ramsden or Mrs. Ramsden Miss Phipps.

In the Piazza del Duomo the offensive was resumed. Not that there was any noise about it. The citizens of Florence noticed two middle-aged ladies criticising Giotto's Tower a little unfavourably: nothing more. None the less the whole eight were at it again. It all began by Miss Phipps saying with seeming simplicity: 'We will walk to the Via Tornabuoni. All the best shops are there.'

At once the Ramsdens were up in arms. 'Ellen is getting out of hand,' said one, 'she is trying to show us the town. We must refuse to look at shops. I adore shops and detest picture galleries. But picture galleries bore Ellen: we should therefore insist on visiting picture galleries.'

'Augusta is going to thwart us again,' sighed a ghostly Phipps. 'But we know the way to the galleries and Augusta does not. Though less pleasantly, the galleries may answer the same purpose.'

'How delightful it is to look at the shops,' mourned a Ramsden and a Phipps in mutual regret, 'and how tedious to look at pictures! Why can't they stop nagging and let us be happy among the shops just as when we used to go up to town with Mamma?'

'Ellen is unbearable,' said an irritable Ramsden. 'She is making me tell lies again and she is driving me to a picture gallery. I hate telling lies, and, still more, I hate picture galleries.'

'Very well,' said a vindictive Phipps, 'she *shall* look at pictures. We know the gallery, and she doesn't. She shall go through every room twice.'

They climbed impossible stairs, they plunged down interminable passages, they circled room after slippery room. But many a noble scheme has been betrayed by physical weakness. The mere accumulation of boredom and fatigue soon took from Mrs. Ramsden the power of simulating an enthusiasm for pictures, and from Miss Phipps the strength to persist in offering food for that enthusiasm.

They left the gallery speechless with exhaustion. Ellen required a yard of grey velvet ribbon. They entered a shop. 'It will be difficult to match,' said Ellen. 'We had better sit down.'

But Mrs. Ramsden drifted off to another counter. When they left the shop, Mrs. Ramsden carried a parcel. 'Some things I wanted,' she explained. 'Let us have tea, Ellen. Take me to a teashop.'

Tea is a great humanizer. Insensibly they began to talk, pleasantly, unguardedly. No sign from the ghostly Phippses, nothing

but the faintest chuckle from the shadowy Ramsdens troubled their pleasure. Augusta was as unrestrained and charming as in the old days. She even allowed Ellen to pay for tea.

At dinner they appeared radiant. They beamed like sunlight; they blossomed like flowers. The guests were nonplussed. The wildest theories were advanced and exploded. It was unnatural, inexplicable, psychologically impossible. And the only incident which could have thrown any light on it occurred when the two had already retired to their bedroom. Mrs. Ramsden's parcel lay on the bed. She took it up and handed it to Miss Phipps. 'A little surprise for you, Ellen,' she said.

Miss Phipps opened the parcel. It contained an expensive silk blouse.

ON THE THRESHOLD

ON THE THRESHOLD

AUNT LOUISA WAS AN ADMIRABLE TRAVELLING companion, admirable, Elizabeth thought, not only because of her virtues but also because of her shortcomings. Her mind was stored with information. Her knowledge of architecture, for instance, was precise and unerring. She was perfect in her dates and styles and periods, so that she would dissect a cathedral for you as easily and accurately as she would carve a chicken and, besides this, she knew, it seemed, the individual history of every town they visited. It was as if her mind consisted of a series of compact little cupboards, so that you only had to unlock the Canterbury cupboard or the Rye cupboard or the Chester cupboard to take from its shelf any detail you might require. And the best of it was that Aunt Louisa never bothered you. She never unlocked a cupboard unless you asked her to. She would take you by easy and unhurrying stages to each point of interest, but not a word would she say about it unless you enquired. Nor did she expect to be asked: it was just as you liked. So that there were often periods of silence between her and Elizabeth, periods in which, without any sense of constraint, each retired into her secret world.

Elizabeth's world was very different from Aunt Louisa's. It was a world of which she had only recently become fully conscious, though she had explored its fringes in childhood. She had never spoken to anyone of this world, indeed it had never occurred to her that, for anyone besides herself, it would have any meaning, even if she had been able to put her sense of it into words. Of what did it consist? It might perhaps be hinted at, she thought, as a warm pool of fine emotion in which she could dip herself, always to come out of it delighted and refreshed; or as an

illumination, a perfume, left in her mind by all beautiful things—by music and colour, by certain poems, certain prose, by fine buildings, beautiful or terrible aspects of nature. Yet those were merely symbols, not definitions of it. It was something more than that. It was vivid and alive and richly complex: perhaps, after all, it was nothing less than her real innermost self, that self which lies beyond the reach of any external disturbance. Whatever it was, however ignored and inexplicable by the plain facts of life, it was, to Elizabeth, intensely near; and often, during the present tour with Aunt Louisa, when they visited some beautiful old town, Elizabeth would let herself merge deliciously into that world of hers from which she would look out with doubled enjoyment on the scenes which they explored. And Aunt Louisa never disturbed Elizabeth's silence on these occasions, for she herself, whether talking or silent, was all the time hard at work, recognising, corroborating, correcting, amplifying, rearranging those cupboards of hers in the light of present experience. The process was revealed by a running accompaniment of interjections, a sort of subdued ventriloquy. Elizabeth, when she heard it going on, would say to herself:—‘Ah! She is registering!’ and suddenly feeling strangely alone, would contemplate with amusement and admiration the efficient little engine by her side.

Aunt Louisa described nothing as beautiful and almost everything as interesting. ‘I must warn you,’ she would say to anyone who showed a tendency to become metaphysical, ‘that I am a strictly matter-of-fact person.’ And had she known that Elizabeth regarded her as an efficient machine, she would have felt it to be a compliment.

And now, as the train rattled over the green levels of reclaimed marshland, she sat, upright and intelligent, watching the flying landscape. She was entertaining herself, Elizabeth knew, by noting how obsequiously each red-roofed village and each Gothic church complied with her exactly classified knowledge of them. There they were, beautiful but helpless: Aunt Louisa had them gripped in a system, a classification from which escape was impossible.

Elizabeth, too, gazed out of the carriage window, but she did not see the landscape. Her thoughts, too, were busy with classification, but classification of a different kind. She was trying to knit together the scattered threads of her dream. She had dreamed it again last night for the third time. Each time it had been, she was sure, the same dream, exact in every detail, but on this last occasion it had been more vivid and clear than before. And when she woke it had remained so real in her memory that she seemed by waking from it rather to have fallen out of reality and into a dream. Even now, as she sat in the train, she remained bathed in the atmosphere of it, a warm, mellow mood, a glow half of fulfilment, half of expectancy. But much of the detail which she had remembered at first, she had afterwards forgotten, and now the thing remained in her mind rather as a series of detached experiences.

She could still recall the charm of that thrice-visited town; the little grass-grown street, too steep for any cart; the narrow doorways; the leaning gables looking down into the silence through the bright eyes of small windows. She remembered how either the place or she herself seemed to be expecting something, some discovery or revelation: and then how half way up the steep street she had turned into one of the small doorways, feeling that there perhaps the revelation awaited her, and had paused at the foot of a dark staircase and, looking up, had seen a streamer of sunlight from an upper window printing a bright square across dark panels. But there was nothing there, she felt, except the same question, the same quiet attention.

Then she had found herself on a high platform of the ramparts under a great four-turretted tower. The plain below stretched in green flats to a straight blue ribbon of sea, and over the green flats sunlight and cloud-shadows kept up a ceaseless variegation of violet and gold and rose. Away to the westward another hill-town stood among clustered trees. Was it there, perhaps, that she would find the answer to the secret? But no: the answer, she felt, lay in something she had forgotten about the grey tower behind her.

The door of it was locked. She heard a dull reverberation from within when she released the handle.

She skirted a great church and entered. Inside, all was height and silence. The clear, watery light fell on grey walls and arches which bloomed to yellow where sunshine fell through tall windows. In the transepts, delicate Norman arches screened the triforium, and again, as she studied their carving, she seemed on the brink of a solution. As she watched for it, it brightened and faded, came and went, like sunshine and shadow on a windy day. But soon she seemed to lose the track of it, and then she became aware that the silence was being meted out into great leisurely lengths. There was a feeling that time moved slowly here: and soon the feeling materialized into the slow, ponderous beat of a great pendulum swinging its wide arc under the vault of the central tower. Each pause between each great tick seemed to be leading up to some final event, some release of the growing stress of attention. But evidently the church had not given her the answer, and she next remembered herself climbing four steps into the doorway of a low, half-timbered house. Inside, she had found herself in a wide dark-panelled room. After the bright sunshine of the street the place seemed sunk in twilight, for the heavy-beamed ceiling was almost within reach of her finger-tips and the light came sparsely through closed lattices. Here the tension was keener than ever. Something was impending, imminent. She dared not move for fear of releasing the spring. A staircase descended into the room. There were two doors in the panelling. She listened breathless for a step on the stair, watched for a movement of one of the doors. Had she waited thus for hours or only for a few seconds? She could not tell, but, sure enough, as she glanced from one door to the other, the unwatched one had opened and a woman stood holding the handle. She was an old woman, tall and thin, with weary, faded eyes set shallow in a sunken face pale and discoloured like wax, and waxlike it caught the cold gleam from the windows. She stood there for a second only, then suddenly held out both hands to Elizabeth. 'You?' she whispered

eagerly: 'you at last?' And instantly the tension snapped and Elizabeth, impelled by sudden recognition, rushed towards her, exclaiming: 'Tell me, O tell me . . .' But the energy of her rush had developed into a loud, chaotic whirlpool, and she had awoken with thumping heart and the hollow disappointment of the unanswered question

She was roused from her reverie by the thuddering of the brakes. The train was pulling up and Aunt Louisa was lifting luggage from the rack. 'We can send our things on the hotel omnibus,' she said, 'and then we shall be free to walk.'

Aunt Louisa attached great importance to method of approach. She held that you should enter a town by the route on which you will encounter in due order those essential details which together compose the town's individuality. Thus the proper facts will sort themselves simply and systematically in the mind and that labour of classification which springs from haphazard sight-seeing will be avoided.

Happily this method suits equally as well the æsthetic as the scientific attitude, and Elizabeth knew from past experience that she would best capture the spirit of the place by putting herself entirely under her aunt's guidance.

Thus, instead of climbing the steep approach from the station, they turned to the right and skirted the edge of the town: then, wheeling to the left, they found themselves at the foot of a steeply ascending little street, narrow and grass-grown. At the first glance Elizabeth knew it. It was *her* street, the street which she had already visited three times in dream. There were the same narrow doorways, the little houses climbing the ascent gable by gable, the same earnest survey of the street by small, bright-eyed windows.

They began to climb. Aunt Louisa was speaking. 'After we have visited the churchyard,' she was saying, 'I want to find the point of view of a drawing of the exterior which appears in my history of Gothic architecture. It is a view which shows rather interestingly the junction of three different periods.'

Elizabeth did not hear her. She was watching for the little doorway on the left. Yes, there it was: exact, unmistakable. Inevitably Elizabeth turned into it and with fluttering heart stood at the foot of the stairs. The sun shone through the upper window, lighting the dark panelling with a square of gold. And, just as in her dream, the place was intent, listening, waiting. Outside, Aunt Louisa was calling her, and Elizabeth turned and reluctantly left the house. 'An interesting staircase,' she explained falteringly.

'But, my dear, the house is occupied,' remonstrated her aunt, and they continued their ascent. Soon they were skirting the church. 'A most interesting church,' said Aunt Louisa. 'It contains some fine Norman work.'

'You mean the triforium arches in the transept?' Elizabeth ventured. 'Elizabeth,' said her aunt, 'you have been reading the guide-book.' Elizabeth thrilled silently. Were those arches indeed the same? Would she be able, this time, to seize their hidden significance, to catch the glimpse which would irradiate the whole mystery?

But, according to Aunt Louisa's method of approach, they must visit the platform of the Flanders Tower before visiting the church. There, too, everything seemed to Elizabeth to be absorbed, concentrated on the supreme event. Those changing colours on the grass-flats, the violet, the gold and the rose, seemed on the point of blossoming into some revealing splendour, and again she found herself trying to recollect what it was that she had forgotten about the tower. Aunt Louisa told her all about the tower, its date, its function, its history, but that forgotten thing remained forgotten and they left the tower for the church. 'And after the church,' said Aunt Louisa, 'I must find the point of view of that drawing.'

They entered by the well-remembered porch and Elizabeth at once crossed to the south transept. The arches were there precisely as she knew them. Their loveliness returned to her with the same shock of delight, the same vanishing hint of a forgotten link, now seen, now lost, like the flicker of a flame, the flash of a

wing, the sudden, half-apprehended sense of a remembered perfume. When she studied them the memory vanished: she turned away and it beckoned to her from remote distances. And then, as before, she became suddenly aware of the measured swing of the great pendulum, and as she listened she rose, as it were, on the growing crest of each pause; but when the beat came she fell back into the hollow of the next wave-trough. Surely, if she had patience, the tremendous moment would arrive: a beat would come from which there would be no relapsing, but release, fulfilment, revelation. She waited with growing excitement, growing concentration, till the tension of each pause became an agony. An irrepressible cry rose in her throat. Just as she felt that she could restrain it no longer, her aunt, who had completed her reclassification of the building, touched her arm and suggested departure.

Elizabeth accompanied her aunt in her search for that interesting view of the church, but it continued to elude them: houses seemed to get in the way of it. Aunt Louisa attached great importance to its discovery: 'It is so extremely instructive,' she said. But before they found Aunt Louisa's view they found Elizabeth's house, the low, half-timbered house with the four steps up to the door. She came upon it without surprise, for she knew she must find it sooner or later. The windows stared cold and dull. The house was to let. Elizabeth tried the door: it was open and they entered. As she latched it again, she felt the hush of an intense expectancy close down on the place. They stood in the dim, low-ceilinged room into which a clear light filtered through dusty lattices. Aunt Louisa instantly took up the good work of classification, scrutinizing casement and ceiling, unerringly dating the panelling: and soon she was climbing the stairs to carry her activities to the upper floor. Elizabeth stood alone, watching, listening. The whole room was watching and listening too. The sense of it was overpowering. The place was crouching, waiting for her to move. She felt the heart-beats thickening in her throat. One of the doors creaked and an inarticulate exclamation burst from her. The spell was momentarily broken. She heard her aunt's

footsteps overhead. Taking a deep breath to ease the oppressive tightening of her chest, she tiptoed quietly up the creaking stairs, and silent, invisible things followed her.

She found herself on a darkly-panelled landing on to which three doors opened. The one on the right was ajar: a spearhead of sunlight gilded the floor and she heard her aunt pacing inside the room. Just as Elizabeth turned to join her, the door on the left opened and the dream-woman stepped out on to the landing. The shallow, faded eyes were the same and the long, bony face of polished wax. Elizabeth clapped her hand to her mouth to stifle a cry. Then the woman recognised her. Her eyes lit up and she stretched out her hands. 'You?' she said eagerly, 'it's you?' A warm tide of happiness invaded Elizabeth. She seemed on the point of embracing again a friend long lost.

The voice of Aunt Louisa broke in upon them. 'Elizabeth!' she called. 'Elizabeth.' Elizabeth started and half-turned towards the door. When she looked round again the light was gone out of the faded eyes and the woman stood calm with her hands clasped at her waist.

'I beg your pardon, Miss,' she said, 'I mistook you . . .'

'For whom?' asked Elizabeth, breathlessly.

'For no-one, Miss, I thought . . . I seemed to recognise you . . . I thought you had come to tell me something.'

'But tell me, who did you think I was?'

'No-one, Miss: really, no-one. Only someone in a dream.'

Aunt Louisa was calling again. 'Elizabeth! Elizabeth! Come here!' Elizabeth entered the room. Her aunt stood by the window. 'Look here, Elizabeth!' she said excitedly. 'I've found it. There's no mistaking it. The view of the church. Most interesting. Most instructive.' But Elizabeth could not reply. She seemed to have suddenly been wakened out of a deep sleep. She was dazed. Her mind was like a pool blurred by a shower of raindrops. What had been the matter with her all day? Was she ill? Was her mind unsettled? Her face flushed with sudden alarm and she wondered nervously whether Aunt Louisa had noticed anything peculiar

in her behaviour. What could have given her all these strange ideas about the town? The sense of them was leaving her now, leaving her so rapidly that she already felt as though she were criticising the eccentricities of another individual.

When they left the room to go downstairs, the woman was still on the landing. Elizabeth glanced at her. 'Surely I never saw her before?' she thought, and the woman, too, glanced at Elizabeth as at a stranger.

THE WORCESTER BOWL

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IT WAS SATURDAY AFTERNOON, AND IN Heaven, as elsewhere, it was half-holiday. The gate of Heaven was locked, the key in Peter's pocket, and Peter and the Omnipotent, having shaken off the burden of the week, were taking the celestial air on the ramparts.

In Hell similar conditions prevailed. The stoking for the weekend was done, the devils had piled pitchforks, and Satan, like a rabbit in the entrance of his burrow, sat idly in Hell's-Mouth, sunning himself.

Meanwhile, in his vicarage upon the earth, the Reverend Theophilus Jenkinson was entertaining to tea Mr. and the Honourable Mrs. Plantagenet Jones, the noblest of his parishioners.

Let us return to Heaven. The Omnipotent and Peter are still taking the celestial air and approaching in their stroll one of those many watch-towers which soar rotundly out of the ramparts of Heaven, they climb into it and lean over its high parapet. Far beneath them, through a thousand atmospheres and a thousand voids, they see (and pretend not to see) Satan sunning himself in Hell's-Mouth: and, each time they catch his eye they hear (and pretend not to hear) his irreverent chuckling. Far and near, beneath them and around them, smoothly and faultlessly the tremendous order of the Universe runs like an exquisite machine. In the midst of it, minute but indispensable, the Solar System weaves its inevitable dance, and, like a dust-mote in the swirl of it, the World-of-Men sweeps in its orbit round the sun. And, swarming on this fraction of a fraction, life in the tiniest seed grows and blossoms and is changed in obedience to Nature's unalterable laws.

But Peter and the Omnipotent had watched it all so long that, for them, the wonder was gone out of it. In the Dawn-of-Time, when the Omnipotent in the exuberant vigour of his youth had conceived it and fashioned it, they had delighted in the miracle of its perfect economy. It had seemed to them food for eternal thought that this huge scheme of things should depend upon its minutest, as upon its greatest, law: that, should a nightingale be hatched from a hedge-sparrow's egg, Time and Space would go down into eternal chaos; and if once a flung pebble were to float on the face of a stream, that instant would the Universe dissolve in a puff of smoke. But from long custom these things were become to them as a familiar nursery-rhyme, sounding in the ear but silent to the mind. Yet the pleasure of watching the system at work remained, and they gazed down on things in general.

'I perceive,' said the All-Seeing presently, 'that my servant Jenkinson is giving a tea. He is handing hot cakes.'

'To the Honourable Mrs. Plantagenet Jones,' said Peter: 'a woman of unerring tact.'

'My servant Jenkinson,' continued the Omnipotent, 'is a very, very good man. I have watched him closely for a fortnight and, during that period, he has not committed the smallest indiscretion. Conduct so unusual deserves recognition. The question (always a difficult one) is, what form should recognition take? Happiness he already possesses. Long life is not always considered an advantage.'

'Riches?' suggested Peter.

'Riches, being a saint, he would, or should, despise.' And the All-Knowing knitted his brows.

'I have it,' he said at last, and he smote the parapet. 'I will leave it to him. All his prayers shall be granted.'

At this there arose through the void of space such a becaklement from Hell's-Mouth that the Omniscient knew at once that he had made a mistake. Peter knew it too and urged him to recall his decision. But Satan's laughter and Peter's importunity only hardened the determination of the Ancient-of-Days.

Satan laughed again, and that settled it. . . .

The Reverend Theophilus Jenkinson had only one worldly preoccupation, and that was china. Now the Honourable Mrs. Plantagenet Jones hated china, yet at the moment when Peter and the All-Seeing carried their attention back on to the tea-party, she had just turned on her brightest smile and was saying as follows:

‘They tell me, Mr. Jenkinson, that your china is quite wonderful. I simply dote on china. Though,’ she hastened to add, as a precaution against pitfalls, ‘I know nothing whatever about it. Still, as I always tell Plantagenet, I know what I like.’

‘That,’ said the All-Knowing, ‘is a lie.’

‘Surely the woman knows what she likes,’ quoth Peter.

‘Possibly, though not necessarily. Possibly, too, she always tells Plantagenet. But she said she doted on china. She doesn’t.’

‘That,’ Peter explained, ‘is tact.’

‘Perhaps,’ growled the All-Wise, ‘but not fact. Make a note of it.’ Peter made a note of it.

‘This,’ Mr. Jenkinson was saying, ‘is the gem of my little collection,’ and he tenderly lifted from the shelf a small Worcester bowl. ‘Pray,’ said he, ‘observe the mark.’

Now Satan had been watching his opportunity and, as the Reverend Theophilus inverted the bowl to show its mark to Mrs. Jones, Satan deftly knocked it out of his hand.

Hearts stood still. Like a pair of old vultures, Peter and the Omnipotent craned further over Heaven’s Parapet. Mrs. Jones gasped, and the Reverend Theophilus snapped out the two words: ‘Stop it.’

How much hung on those words. For observe that he did not say ‘May I catch it,’ or ‘May it not break,’ but simply ‘Stop it,’ and that so quickly that the words were out before the bowl was half-way to the floor. And, craning over the battlements, the Omnipotent heard Mr. Jenkinson’s prayer and the Worcester bowl stopped miraculously in mid-passage. But only for a fraction of a second, for the next moment the earth, hurled off at a tangent to

its wonted orbit, was consumed in a holocaust of stampeding planets; the Solar System buckled and was shattered like a bursting shell, and the Universe was dissolved in a puff of smoke.

And through the racket there rang from the mouth of Hell shriek upon shriek of Satanic laughter.

Then, in the twinkling of an eye, Heaven and Hell were flooded with millions of human souls. To Hell went the Honourable Mrs. Plantagenet Jones who did not dote on china: to Heaven, the Reverend Theophilus Jenkinson, best of men.

But to the Omnipotent, when he had finished sneezing, the thought came that perhaps his servant Jenkinson attached too much importance to china. The more he reflected upon it, the more indignant he became. 'Unheard of,' he muttered. 'Preposterous! Was there ever such disproportion! Jenkinson is much to blame:' and the callow soul of Jenkinson was haled before him.

Very transparent and piteous it looked as it hung before the Presence.

'What is the meaning of this, Jenkinson?' boomed the Omnipotent.

'What indeed?' piped the thin soul of Theophilus.

The Omnipotent scowled. 'You do not appear, Jenkinson, to realise what you have done. You have been thoughtless enough to wreck the Universe.'

Jenkinson was dazed by his recent experience, and the dark hints of the Omnipotent dazed him still more. He did not reply. He simply flapped in the celestial air.

'You dropped a piece of china,' the Omnipotent explained. 'Many people drop china: especially servants. The pieces are swept up, and there the matter ends. But you, to save your paltry bowl, must needs break my Law of Gravitation. "Stop it," you said. You had no time for more. Had there been time, you would have said, "O Lord to whom all things are possible, may it please Thee to suspend in mid-air this my most exquisite bowl of Worcester . . ." and so on. You understand now?'

The soul of Jenkinson bowed.

'Have you any explanation to offer?'

'It all happened so suddenly . . .' the pale soul babbled.

'It did,' agreed the Omnipotent ruefully. 'But here, where time is not, such a plea can have little weight. Indeed,' he added, prompted by nudges and whispers from Peter, 'since you have stupidly destroyed my Law of Gravitation, it is obvious that nothing can have any weight.'

A silence fell.

'I submit,' said the soul tentatively, 'that the inventor of Worcester is as much to blame as I.'

Peter snorted. 'Had Worcester not been invented,' he broke in, 'doubtless you would have dropped some Crown Derby.'

'You cannot deny it, Jenkinson,' said the Omnipotent.

Jenkinson, intrigued by the argument, grew bolder.

'Since, O Lord, you created me, the inventor of Worcester, and everybody else, surely . . .' An interrupting cackle from Hell warned them that they were on dangerous ground. The soul of Jenkinson did not complete its sentence: the Omnipotent, doubtful where the pitfall lay, kept quiet and looked profound, and again Peter came to the rescue.

'His Omnipotence is surprised, Jenkinson,' he boomed, 'that you, a Bachelor of Divinity, should ventilate unorthodox views on the subject of free-will.'

'And not only surprised, but also grieved,' added the Omnipotent. Jenkinson's soul changed colour and grew cautious.

'At least,' he cried, 'may I not claim credit for having saved from destruction, if only for a moment, a thing of exquisite beauty?' And even yet there was a ring in his voice as he touched on the Worcester bowl. The Omnipotent was moved: he wavered visibly. Again Peter snatched the reins, for this was no time to stand on ceremony.

'No,' he thundered, 'for, as the Omniscient will tell you, if your bowl had reached the floor, it would not, as a matter of fact, have broken.'

'Perfectly true,' confirmed the Omniscient: 'absolutely true.'

A little fact, Jenkinson, which reveals the monstrous futility of your crime.' And he made a gesture as though to terminate the interview. 'Nothing,' he said conclusively, 'can be gained by procrastination. In short, Jenkinson, what is your final excuse?'

'It is this,' answered the soul of Jenkinson, 'that when I said "Stop it" I was speaking, as it happened, to Mrs. Plantagenet Jones.'

THE SCHOOLMASTER

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IN THE VILLAGE SCHOOLROOM THE BLIND was drawn except for three inches at the bottom through which the September sun threw on to the sill a blazing band of light which, as the breeze stirred the blind, alternately spread and retired across it like an ebbing and flowing wave, or dropped sheer over the edge of it on to the floor. The room was filled with that limpid grey light which is found in shaded places on days of brilliant sunshine. It illuminated the round backs of thirty-three village boys who did not wish to learn, and the mild presence of Mr. Hinks, the village schoolmaster, who did not wish to teach. Both he and they, bowed beneath the bondage of circumstances, felt the occasional flutter of a delicious breeze in the room and longed to escape into the summer awaiting them outside.

This longing revealed itself differently in master and pupils. In the pupils it appeared as a subdued insubordination, in the master as a certain apprehensive timidity vainly fretting at the incredibly slow passage of time.

Nature had not been kind to Mr. Hinks. It seemed as if at first she had designed him to be a low comedian, for she had given him the long, meek, bony face, the shapeless, elastic mouth, the red nose, and that appearance of perpetual chilliness, which comprise the external outfit of a certain traditional type of low comedian—an appearance which is usually achieved only with the aid of artificial means. But, after loading him with these qualifications, Nature had cruelly withheld the rest—the self-assurance, the tricks of gesture, the secret of laughter. Thus Mr. Hinks was not a low comedian but a poor, shrinking creature with the pathos and appeal of ineffectuality about him.

He was that type of man which always seems destined to failure: a man with a craving, in some vague sense, for the beautiful,

stirred by vague enthusiasms which seemed never to define themselves—an artistic temperament which could find no outlet, or rather, perhaps, it was no more than a desire to possess the artistic temperament. For his parents and teachers, the only distinctive fact about the boy Hinks had been that he was a scholar. He was fond of books and was a painstaking and indefatigable student. Obviously he was intended to be a schoolmaster. The young Hinks did not want to be a schoolmaster: the prospect frightened him. But as others had decided the question and he himself was unable to suggest an alternative, he resigned himself, and in course of time this sensitive and ineffectual soul (the last man on earth to control those slippery, impulsive little animals called schoolboys) was duly installed in a village school

This morning Hinks was in a state of miserable tension. He knew by infallible signs that he had somehow allowed the class to break its moorings and that it was slowly and surely moving beyond his control. The room was full of a subdued murmur. Silence had somehow ceased and now a low hum of universal conversation confronted him. What was he to do? Experience told him that a certain intonation would check the anarchy: but it told him also that he could not be sure of commanding that intonation, and that if he tried and failed, if the note rang false, his fear would be a naked and laughable fact and that, so far from improving matters, he would loose chaos on himself there and then. His uncertainty became agonising. His cheeks pulsed nervously where they covered the jawbones, his moist hands grew restless, his poor red nose shone.

The disturbance grew horribly. Above the general buzz, details which pricked him with terror became more and more frequent. Somebody whistled. A slate fell with a clatter. Robson was struggling with Green for the possession of a cap. Something must be done. He pulled himself together, confiscated the cap, and made the two offenders stand out. A perceptible ripple of laughter ran round the class, but the hubbub had broken off short. Intense relief came over him. He felt like an invalid who has just come

through a paroxysm, exhausted but freed from torture. A warm breeze from the window touched his face and for a moment he thrilled to the deliciousness of the day, but only to be reminded that he was embarked on another year of this unbearable existence. He had made attempts to find other work, always in vain. His very appearance gave him away and when he spoke the unfavourable impression was reinforced. He had no self-confidence, he could not assert himself.

He set himself to envisage his position clearly. Could he accept the fact that he would still be a schoolmaster a year, even a month, hence? Emphatically not. The prospect of repeating week after week, month after month, this losing battle against opposition and ridicule was unendurable. The thing would drive him mad. He must escape at all costs: so much was settled.

Now for the question how! That question was seldom out of his mind, but now he tried to weigh the pros and cons coldly, mathematically, as an impersonal problem. He had spent what little capital he possessed in qualifying as a schoolmaster; therefore the only job he could take must be one paid from the beginning. But all the occupations which came into his mind necessitated an apprenticeship, and for this reason one after another had had to be ruled out. He had read somewhere that one ought to live dangerously. Simply to abandon the school without attempting to get other work, to trust to chance, become a tramp, a beggar,—that would be to live dangerously: but commonsense rebelled. It was bold and romantic in theory, mere rash senselessness in practice. Gradually he felt the prison closing round him as he disposed one by one of the possibilities of escape. As a result of his reasoning two facts emerged:—he could not continue his present existence, and . . . there was no means of escape from it.

This dreadful conclusion somehow consoled him. He felt at least that he had cleared away a great incubus of vague speculation and fruitless worry, that the thing was reduced to its essential simplicity....

As if from a great distance and after a long interval of time, he

suddenly found himself back in the schoolroom. He recognised with surprise the rows of towzle-headed boys, his own ink-stained desk, and the sunny blind which was still undulating to the breeze. The church clock began to strike. It must be eleven. But, to his amazement, the clock struck twelve, and he realised that a whole hour had passed like a flash. What had happened in the interval? How had the boys behaved? He had no idea.

At a sign from him, a turmoil of noise and hurry burst upon the room, the clatter of shaken desks, the knocking of boots against forms, the beat of frenzied feet on the wooden floor. In fifteen seconds the room was empty and silent. It returned Hinks's gaze with an intense familiarity, half hateful, half loveable, which seemed to be symbolised by the faded maps on the walls and the pervading smell of schoolboy. Absent-mindedly he wound a long strap round and round a pile of five or six books and buckled it. Then he went out, automatically carrying with him the bundle of books and the confiscated cap.

Out-of-doors sunshine pervaded everything. He noticed for the first time vivid green moss under the step, green grass-blades springing above the line of the gutter which edged the eaves, a spider's web between the brickwork and the window. The familiar scene in this strong, live, illumination seemed to present itself to him with an intensity which gave to it a feeling of strangeness like a vivid dream: it seemed to him something more than reality. Hinks felt strong, free and self-possessed, and yet suddenly, to his surprise, he had to choke down a sob which rose in his throat. Instead of returning indoors to his dinner, he walked away from the school, bare-headed, carrying the cap and books. . . .

An old barn stood in a corner of a field close to the school. The huge expanse of its tiled roof sagged and bulged with the distortion of age. Behind it rose the green solemnity of ancient oaks, as old as the barn itself, lifting above its long roof mound over mound of luxuriant foliage. The great doorway generally stood open: seen from the dark interior it looked like the mouth of a huge

shining cavern whose brightness threw a ragged splash of gold into the twilight of the barn. At one end of it trusses of hay had been heaped up almost to the roof.

The barn was the headquarters of a gang of which Robson and Green were the chiefs. In times of emergency they barred the door from within and the place became forthwith impregnable, so that even the owner himself, Reed the farmer, had more than once been shut out of his own property. Thence arose complaints to the schoolmaster and timid and invariably unsuccessful attempts on the part of Mr. Hinks to establish the identity of the culprits.

Upon the stroke of the clock, Robson and Green, abandoning their attitudes of disgrace, had hurried off to the barn without waiting to recover the cap from Mr. Hinks. They had reason to suspect that the commissariat of the gang, which consisted of apples, a tin of bullseyes, and a bottled filled with a terrible home-made drink, had been looted. They had reached the barn and were absorbedly digging in the mounds of hay, when they heard a step in the doorway which they had closed but not barred. Instinctively they assumed the immobility of rocks, but on this occasion in vain, for the door creaked on its hinges and the sun projected a streamer of light precisely on to the crouching form of Green. He glanced round cautiously. The intruder stood looking at him. It was Mr. Hinks.

'Come here,' said Hinks, in a voice startlingly unlike his own. The boys climbed down and approached him. Something seemed to be wrong with him. Not only his voice but his face was changed: it had the strangest expression, like a smile, and yet it did not seem that he was either happy or amused. Was he drunk? Or mad? There was something vaguely disquieting about him. He was struggling to speak again.

'Are there any others here?' he asked in a strange dry voice.

'No, only us,' answered Robson. Hinks undid the straps from the books which he was carrying.

'Here,' he continued, holding out the books. 'Take these to my desk.' Robson took them and the boys started off, glad to go.

'Green. Here!' said the voice again. 'Your cap!' Green paused and glanced back. Mr. Hink's eyes were looking at him, but as though they did not see him. They reminded him of the eyes of a drowned tramp whom he had once seen dragged out of a pond. He turned and ran after Robson

After dinner, the boys returned to school. Mr. Hinks was late. Five minutes, ten minutes, a quarter of an hour went by and still he failed to appear. The boys were delighted, exhilarated. Something unusual must have happened. Twenty minutes, twenty five, half an hour. The excitement grew intense. Perhaps he wasn't going to turn up at all. They would get the afternoon off. Meanwhile, to pass the time, Robson and Green began an impromptu riot. The riot was interrupted by a step in the passage and in five seconds each boy was in his place, wearing an appearance of guileless and patient propriety.

The intruder, however, was not Mr. Hinks but Reed the farmer, and evidently he was in a temper.

'Here,' he growled at the nearest boy. 'Where's Mr. Hinks? They'll get it this time, I'll take good care of that.'

The boys stared at him uncomprehendingly.

'Which are they, now?' he continued. 'You may just as well tell me. I'll find out anyhow in the end.' He glared round on them, but, getting no response, he turned to go. 'Very well. I'll have to break the door in and then they'll get such a whacking as they'll not forget in a hurry.'

Mention of the door enlightened Robson and Green.

'It's none of us,' said Green. 'You can see for yourself we're all here.'

The boys' faces convinced Reed that this was true. 'Then it's tramps,' he said, and hurried out followed by most of the boys.

Solemn adjurations at the barn-door elicited no reply. 'There's no use pretending you're not there: I can see you,' roared the untruthful but diplomatic Reed. Then, taking up one of the heavy stones which were used to prop open the door, he broke in one of the planks and climbed in.

'Now don't any of you dare to follow me,' he said as he disappeared into the darkness. The boys clustered eagerly round the door, listening. Presently Reed made a sound. It was not a word but an exclamation like the cough of a sheep. Immediately afterwards he came hurrying out, his face transformed. Evidently he had received a shock.

'Now you can all run away home,' he said to them. 'There'll be no school this afternoon. And Bobby, you stay with me,' he said to his own boy who was among the rest.

When the boys had cleared off he spoke to his son. 'Now you cut along as fast as you can, first to Jackson the policeman, and then to Dr. Mawson. Tell them Mr. Hinks has hanged himself in the barn. Say I'm waiting here, and, mind, not a word to anyone.'

HARE AND HOUNDS

H A R E A N D H O U N D S

IT WAS NOT UNTIL HE UNPACKED HIS portmanteau at the Albergo Centrale in a small Tuscan hill-town that Marlyon felt really safe. He had done the whole journey without a stop, for it would have been madness to hope to pass unobserved in London, Paris, Turin, or Florence. The thing had become altogether beyond endurance. Every large town in Europe and America was now closed to him. His only hope of safety was to hide himself in some remote village. He realized what it must feel like to be a criminal fleeing from justice.

Marlyon was not, however, a criminal: he was simply a pianist,—not merely one among the dozen first-class pianists, but an astounding phenomenon whose like had never been known. The English papers boasted that he was an all-British product, even British-trained: they traced back his pedigree to the 14th century. And now things had come to such a pass that to every city of Europe and America his face was as familiar as the face of its king or president. Wherever he went, people nudged one another and he found himself stared at. Whenever he gave a recital it was almost impossible for him to get into the hall through the crowd waiting to catch a glimpse of him. Inside, he was yelled at and worried to death with rapture, bouquets and adulation; and, at the end, it was more difficult to get clear of the place than it had been to reach it. It was like living amongst a continuous insurrection and, in order to escape it, Marlyon had quietly disappeared without confiding to a soul his destination.

When he arrived the inn was empty, so that he enjoyed his meals without apprehension at the little table in the corner of the large tile-floored dining-room. But on the following morning the motor-bus which plied between the little town and the nearest railway station was delivered, outside the Albergo Centrale, of at

least a dozen persons, all of them, to Marlyon's horror, English or American. Marlyon instantly left the town by the south gate. He would lunch at some trattoria in the country and not return until dinner-time, when the party would doubtless have left by the evening bus.

And sure enough, when he did return, he found the dining-room empty. It was not until he had finished his soup that he became aware that two ladies had entered and taken their seats at a table on the opposite side of the room. It was Mrs. Congleton Snaggs of New York and her daughter Eveline, and in ten minutes they had marked him down. Their four eyes were trained on him like four guns, but Marlyon believed he could read in this uncompromising stare the hint of a lingering doubt. They were very nearly certain, but they were not quite certain. The mother turned to the daughter and Marlyon felt sure she was saying:

'We shall see to-morrow, dear, by daylight.'

To nourish this precious doubt, Marlyon tucked his table-napkin under his chin and, helping himself plentifully to Spaghetti, he got down to it in the Italian fashion, shovelling it wholesale into his mouth so that his face suggested a Rococo fountain. Having accomplished this, he glanced across at the enemy. The guns were still ranged on him but, yes, he was sure of it, the doubt had deepened. Then they rallied, it seemed, for Eveline leaned towards her mother and her lips seemed to say:

'Still, one might fall into the habit after several visits.'

The following morning Marlyon bought a pot of pomade and succeeded in making his hair lie flat and sleek, brushed straight back from the forehead.

At lunch he found the enemy in double strength. Not only were Mrs. Congleton Snaggs and her daughter in position but, at the table next them, sat old Mr. Rippington and his young wife. Evidently Mrs. Snaggs had already roped them in and, English though they were, they had been willing, in consideration of the greatness of the enterprise, to emerge from their national exclusiveness.

Marlyon's coiffure shook them visibly. He could interpret the pantomime.

'But so different, even in colour,' Mrs. Rippington was saying.

'Last night, Eveline?' said Mrs. Snaggs. 'I hardly remember, indeed I doubt if we could see by artificial light.'

'Always fluffy and parted on the right,' Mrs. Rippington asserted positively.

'Still, a change is not impossible,' put in Mrs. Snaggs. 'And the face so very like, don't you think?'

As the meal advanced it was obvious that old Mr. Rippington was being egged on. As Marlyon passed their table, he caught the end of a phrase from Mrs. Rippington. 'At least it is simple to try.'

The plan of attack declared itself that afternoon. As he sat outside the café in the piazza Marlyon found himself caught by old Rippington. The old boy, Marlyon could not but admit, had done it neatly. No one could have called it an intrusion. By the purest accident they seemed to find themselves sitting at adjacent tables and before Marlyon could come on guard, old Rippington had caught his eye.

'Wonderful old place, isn't it?' he said jovially. 'And the life too, so entirely different for us English, don't you think?' This was subtle, but Marlyon now had himself in hand.

'Yes, you English have no outdoor cafés,' he replied. The parry was effective: it bamboozled the old boy. Marlyon could almost hear him muttering to himself: 'You English? You?' Then he counter-attacked.

'You speak good English, sir, if I may say so.'

'Ah,' replied Marlyon with a typically Italian gesture, 'my mother, you see, was English.' And he beckoned to the waiter.

At dinner the enemy was quite evidently depressed. Apparently they had already argued it out. Marlyon pictured old Rippington puffing out his flabby cheeks and a little irritably ending the discussion. 'You can't deny that when a man says "my mother was English," with an accent, mind you, on the mother, it means quite clearly that his father was not.'

Marlyon followed up the advantage of the afternoon by wiping his knife and fork on his bread after each course and retaining them when the waiter removed his empty plate. The enemy reeled. Mrs. Rippington was profoundly demoralized. 'Really quite incredible, Mrs. Snaggs,' she said. 'But never, simply *never*, in England!'

Marlyon went to bed in high spirits. The victory was surely his.

Next day at lunch, however, the enemy had been heavily reinforced. It was not the quantity of the reinforcements that disturbed Marlyon, but their quality. They consisted solely of Miss Daisy Schiedemeyer. But an American damsel of that definite, high handed, stick-at-nothing type, was an army-corps in herself. The moral effect of her arrival was tremendous. Desolating doubt had given place to glowing faith and the ten relentless eyes focussed on his unprotected person shone with a terrible menace.

Mrs. Snaggs was apparently summing up for Miss Schiedemeyer the unsatisfactory results of their investigations, but she brushed them aside with scorn. 'You English? That proves nothing. These people have no nationality. They're cosmopolitan. Besides, everyone knows his father *wasn't* English. He was Scotch. Have none of you asked him his name? I'd have thought that was the easiest way.' But tactics of such terrible directness were asserted to be impossible. 'Impossible?' cried Miss Schiedemeyer. 'Wait till this afternoon.'

But even Miss Schiedemeyer was not so brutal as she sounded. She did not actually, in so many words, demand his name from Marlyon, but she watched her opportunity, and when he was settled at his *café* after lunch she suddenly appeared on the scene. In one hand she carried a book and, bearing straight down on Marlyon, she held it out to him with her most winning smile and said: 'Excuse me, but please write something in my autograph book. I've got lots of swells but it's hardly complete without you, is it?' and, placing the book on the table, she glided gracefully away.

In a way, it was a bold stroke, but bold diplomacy rather than bold tactics, and it made him a present of a certain period of spare time. Marlyon thought over the situation carefully. Of course it was possible that he was actually and irretrievably found out and Miss Schiedemeyer simply wanted his autograph; but this, judging by the mood of the enemy at lunch, he disbelieved. They were very nearly certain, but they were still not quite certain. Even in Miss Schiedemeyer there had been, for all her boldness, he thought, just a quaver. In this case her object was clearly, by pretending to know him, to bluff him into giving himself away. However it was, the state of affairs was critical enough: only the most drastic action could save him. Meanwhile she had left the situation, such as it was, in his hands and he at once resolved to keep it stationary for a day or two by simply putting her book into his portmanteau.

By the evening his plan of action had matured and he wrote and posted a card addressed to Signor Giovanni Pimpinelli at the Albergo Centrale. When he returned to the inn Miss Schiedemeyer stood at the door. He smiled as he passed her. 'I am thinking of something to write in your book,' he said, with the slightest foreign accent. 'One of your English proverbs, perhaps.'

Next morning he came upon her in the hall. 'And my book?' she said.

'I have not forgotten,' he answered reassuringly, 'but I have been so busy.'

'Busy?' cried Miss Schiedemeyer. 'I fancied you were taking a rest.'

'By no means,' replied Marlyon. 'We novelists never rest.' And he left her with that to carry on with.

The post card for Signor Pimpinelli had duly arrived. Marlyon took it from the letter-rack and put it in his pocket as he went in to lunch. At lunch the mood of the enemy was indecipherable. They were silent, but were they merely baffled or were they not rather preparing to launch another great attack?

Marlyon finished his lunch first, and, as he passed the enemy's tables, he dropped his post card. He heard the screech of a chair on the tiled floor as he passed into the hall. Miss Schiedemeyer had sprung like a wild-cat upon the post card. She followed him into the hall and returned it to him a little glumly, he thought.

'O, so many thanks,' he said. 'And your book. It is ready. Shall I bring it to you now?'

In a minute he returned with it and, bursting with excitement, Miss Schiedemeyer carried it off into the dining room. Yes, he had copied in an English proverb—*Let Sleeping dogs lie*—and below, it was signed *Giovanni Pimpinelli*. Evidently his English mother had not taught him to spell.

The rout was complete. As he went in to dinner that evening a remark overheard as he passed the enemy's table assured him of his victory. 'But the nose at close quarters,' Mrs. Congleton Snaggs was saying, 'is really not at all like.'

THE QUARREL

T H E Q U A R R E L

HARRIET AUSTIN HAD BEEN LOOKING over a heap of childish possessions which ever since her marriage had been packed away in an old portmanteau. She had ordered the portmanteau to be carried down into the morning-room not because she really wished to unpack it, but with some vague idea of asserting herself against her husband. When he found her at work, she had thought, he would certainly ask her what she was doing and she would reply: 'O, nothing to do with you!' and this would count, she felt, as a score for her.

But now, as she rummaged, she became really interested. Article after forgotten article, as she took it up and wonderingly recognized it, gave out, as a flower gives out its scent, the poignant intense memory of some phase or event of her vanished girlhood. How much of that time she had, it seemed, forgotten. It had not been a happy time and for this reason she seldom looked back on it. When she did so, it seemed to be filled by her fear and hatred of her father. Every recollection led back to that one haunting fact. But now, as she looked over these old things, the memory of another life, apart from but parallel with that life of hatred and fear, came back into her consciousness: a life of hidden joys, secret enthusiasms, all the more intense because guarded jealously from external intrusion.

She came upon a piece of embroidery, long forgotten but now at the first glance vividly recognized. She remembered how it had kept her for a month in a state of delighted exaltation which the troubles of her daily life were powerless to disturb. She could remember the intensity of that emotion—the feeling that she was watching and assisting in the growth of some beautiful miracle—and her glowing delight when it was finished. But though she

remembered the emotion she no longer felt it, and the thing, as she held it up now, was nothing more than the clumsy work of a child.

And here, too, was her old notebook, the notebook into which she had copied in a careful rounded hand, verses which for her childish imagination had been full of a strange magic. One of them, a hymn, had seemed to be saturated with all the fierce and sinister beauty of stormy winter sunsets. Now, except for the faint perfume of that remote memory, it was the merest platitude:

Every morning the red sun
Rises warm and bright,
But the evening cometh on
And the dark cold night.

How her husband would laugh if he were to discover all these old things: and with a glow of passionate resentment she tenderly wrapped up each object, vowing that he should never see it, that she would keep from him at least these cherished secrets, this small room of her mind into which she could escape. And so to each re-discovered toy she attached a fictitious devotion born of his imagined ridicule of it.

Harriet often invented for her husband sins which he could by no possibility have committed and then harboured a deep resentment against him for these fantastic unrealities.

She had almost finished her task and Maurice had not yet come in, when with a shock she came upon a forgotten photo of her father. With extraordinary vividness it called up those sensations which the sight or thought of him had always produced in her: and, as the force of this emotional wave spent itself, she realized that they were almost identical with her feelings towards her husband. Almost, but not quite, because though she hated Maurice she did not fear him.

Harriet never reasoned about her feelings. If she had been asked why she hated Maurice she could have given no reason. She felt vaguely, or perhaps only tried to feel, that she was wronged and misunderstood, but she never defined: she merely felt, simply and strongly. Her hatred was a conviction, almost a principle.

Harriet's first impulse had been to burn her father's photo. Then, for some reason, she changed her mind and balanced the thing on a vase upon the mantelpiece, leaning its top edge against one of her husband's precious engravings, which it partly obscured. In this position it looked strangely out of place.

When at last Maurice came in she was pretending to write letters. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him notice the photo and frown. Instantly a gust of anger enveloped her. Then he looked at it more closely and smiled. The smile irritated her even more than the frown and she waited like a set mousetrap, ready to go off. But Maurice said nothing, and as her tension relaxed it came into her mind that she had placed the photo there with the express purpose of provoking him, and, unused though she was to introspection, she felt ashamed of herself. But immediately the sensation, the irrefutable fact, of her hatred for him returned to her, sufficient in itself to answer all rebukes.

Next day the photograph was still there. She saw Maurice look at it critically and, the moment after, he asked:

'Is that photo going to remain there?'

'I don't know,' Harriet replied and closed her lips with determination.

'I should have thought that you would have preferred to put it away,' he continued.

'Why?' asked Harriet, turning round on him aggressively.

Seeing that she was determined to quarrel, he shrugged his shoulders and went out.

Maurice, too, was acutely aware of this barrier of hate which had imperceptibly risen between them. He could look back to a time when it had been a small and spasmodic event, and further still to a time when it had not existed, but to him, as to Harriet, its origin was a mystery. It seemed like a terrible force of nature which, once they had unconsciously allowed it to take root, had towered up beyond their control, growing, spreading, entangling them like a jungle. But, whereas for Harriet hate was a simple, direct, intuitive thing, for him it was much more complex and

self-conscious. Even when he yielded to it, he loathed it, rebelled against it, as something cruel and degrading. At sudden moments he was seized with remorse: he stood as it were apart and saw Harriet as a poor misguided child and himself as a cad, and he longed to take her in his arms and exorcise once for all this obsession which bound them like an enchantment, poisoned their lives like an abscess. He felt that, as an abscess, it might be laid open and drained, that a perfectly frank discussion of the thing would let out the poison like a surgeon's knife and the sore would dry up, even though both of them remained ignorant of its cause. But Maurice could never bring himself to make the attempt. Whenever he contemplated it, a great nightmare of vague prejudice and inhibitions loomed up and made the thing more impossible than all the labours of Hercules. Once it might have been done: now it was impossible unless some crisis were first to transform both of them.

Several days passed and Harriet did not move the photo. It occupied her thoughts to a strange degree. She watched it as if fascinated. It was as though she were testing a bar of iron, adding weight to weight, watching for the moment when the elastic limit would be reached. 'One more day,' she kept saying to herself, and then she would hesitate, as though she had detected herself in some dishonest act, and with a feeling of disgust and weariness would resolve to take the photo down. But some inner compulsion was too much for her and she dismissed the photo from her mind, feeling that by forgetting she was eluding responsibility.

The thing was becoming equally an obsession to Maurice. It was not the position of the photo that exasperated him but the fact that Harriet was so obviously leaving it there on purpose. It stared him in the face, a symbol of her untiring hatred of him. The fact that she hated her father made it the more wounding, for it was a standing proof that she was willing even to do violence to her own feelings if only, by so doing, she could wound his. The thing in itself was so absurd, yet, because of what it represented,

so desperately serious. He thought of removing the photo when Harriet was out of the room and of making a comic mystery of its disappearance, but he knew only too well what weariness and misery were involved in maintaining a hollow pretence of a joke in the face of deadly earnestness: it was worse than quarrelling outright. So he ended by taking the photo down in her presence and asking casually:

‘May I remove this?’

‘No. Why should you?’ answered Harriet, and she was aware in some dim corner of her being of a feeling of exultation that he was in the trap at last.

‘But why have it there, Harriet?’ he argued. ‘It hides the engraving and, after all, photos are not generally balanced on the tops of vases.’ He spoke calmly but his hand trembled.

‘Put it back,’ said Harriet threateningly.

‘Not there, Harriet.’

‘Then give it to me.’ She rose from her chair.

‘Only on condition that you put it somewhere else,’ and he held it up out of her reach.

‘Give it to me when you’re told,’ she persisted furiously.

Maurice let her snatch it and she at once replaced it on the vase.

‘There,’ she said. ‘Now let it alone.’

Maurice instantly took it down. His blood was boiling: his legs and arms trembled. Harriet sprang at him like a wild cat and they struggled fiercely for the photo. Harriet got hold of it and as he did not relax his grip she tore off a corner of it. Then it was torn again and, sickened and horrified at what they had come to, Maurice let her snatch the remaining piece.

Having nothing left to fight for, Harriet’s nerves collapsed and, falling on her knees over the fragments of the photo, she broke into a torrent of sobs. Something of loneliness and despair in the droop of her shoulders, a glimpse of the unhappy, bewildered child in this perplexing woman sobbing over her scraps of torn cardboard, cut him to the heart. A flood of remorse and pity came over him and he knelt beside her and took her in his arms.

'Harriet dear,' he said, 'why do you drive me into behaving like a beast?' She abandoned herself in his arms without a struggle and, as he rocked and soothed her like a child, she wept as though weeping were a relief to her, as though a dam had burst and all this obstruction of hatred and misunderstanding had been suddenly swept away.

After a while she looked up and said that she would go and bathe her eyes. In ten minutes she returned with an almost priggish radiance about her, like a little girl determined to be good. Maurice was seated at a table, ruefully trying to piece together the torn photo. She bent over him, took the scraps from him, and with a smile of sweet self-righteousness threw them into the fire.

And Maurice, smiling back at her, realized with a sort of horror that his wife had never grown up, that she was still hopelessly a child; and he asked himself wearily, without illusion, how long this new mood was going to last.

THE LABYRINTH

T H E L A B Y R I N T H

OLD MR. FANSHAW, WHO HAD LIVED alone since the death of his wife eight months ago, sat at his breakfast table. He sat there though he had long ago finished breakfast, holding in one hand his pince-nez, a letter in the other, and gazing in front of him in a state of profound abstraction. He had just made a decision which, he felt, would open up a new vista in his life, or rather, would turn his feet back towards old vistas almost forgotten, but now vaguely illuminated for him by the letter in his hand.

Since he had retired from business ten years ago, Mr. Fanshaw had led both outwardly and inwardly a life of uneventful routine, a life in which the past and the future had seemed to have no share. He had lived from day to day consciously and contentedly enacting each detail of the invariable routine, looking forward to nothing. And, until Emmy's death, he had not been aware of the need of anything to look forward to. But, after that event, Mr. Fanshaw had suddenly found that all those small daily details which used to occupy his mind so fully and so pleasantly had suddenly been emptied of all significance: and, forced by this sudden dereliction of the present to turn his eyes to the future, he saw that the future too was empty. So circumstanced, he became aware that small accidents of life which had formerly floated unheeded over his head, now thrust themselves irritably on his attention. He became discontented and acutely conscious that he was daily growing older and more inefficient: the sweet current of his existence had grown stagnant, and in this stagnation, unaccountably, at odd moments, reflections of his remote childhood dawned, shone, and faded. And now this letter with its train of dim associations seemed to have floated into his consciousness simply as another of these ghosts of the past.

The letter was from his sister Agnes with whom he had quarrelled forty years ago, soon after his return from the East. From that day to this he had not heard from her, but now she wrote from the home of their childhood where she had lived ever since the death of their mother. She had only just heard, she wrote, of Emmy's death eight months ago and she could not resist the desire to write and offer her sympathy. She pressed him to come and stay with her for as long or short a time as he felt inclined: it was unnecessary to fix the length of his visit until he found how the place suited him.

Mr. Fanshaw had decided immediately to accept Agnes's invitation. He was pleased that she had not alluded to their quarrel, that she had allowed it quietly to drop out: he was himself the more willing to do so that he had forgotten what it was they had quarrelled over. For him, the quarrel had long ceased to represent an emotion: it had continued merely as a tradition.

As he came to himself and got up from the breakfast table, Mr. Fanshaw found that his life, which during the last few months had become so grey and empty that to contemplate it filled him with a growing terror, was suddenly filled with colour and variety. His mind was all astir with a happy impatience and with a hand trembling with emotion he sat down to write to Agnes.

2.

The drive from the station to the house was through scenes unknown to Mr. Fanshaw. A desolating change had come over the old place. What in his childhood had been a green and quiet countryside was now a straggling suburb of brick and slate. His heart sank as the cab rattled down streets of monotonous jerry-built dwellings. He remembered a clear brook bordered with willows. The willows were gone and the brook buried in a drain somewhere under these mean, depressing streets. A chill of disappointment came over him: he looked forward with

fear to his arrival. Suppose the old home were changed too: he would never be able to stay among this wreckage of gentle memories. He felt even older and more disillusioned than in his loneliness at home.

The cab drove out into a broader street full of busy shops: down its length trams hummed with a hiss of overhead wires. The cab turned into a narrower road to the right and then swung into a gravel drive. A gatepost caught his eye and with a sudden leap of the heart he leant out of the cab window. Yes, he had arrived. The house stood there, surveying its square of garden just as of old. Thank God, there was no change here at least. The windows looked as he remembered them looking when he came home for the holidays, glassing white flecks of sky, extraordinarily bright and clean, and at the top of each exactly four inches of red blind were visible,—those red blinds which always gave a certain distinction to the house-front and seemed somehow to promise warm fires and a dining-table set with a profusion of bright silver. In the hall, too, the old haunting impression awaited him, the sense of a thick carpet underfoot and in the air a pervading sweet-ness of flowering bulbs. He had not foreseen that the place would touch him so intimately, so deeply. He was taken off his guard, so that he nearly forgot to pay the cabman and when Agnes came hurrying forward to meet him he could hardly see her.

For many days after his arrival Mr. Fanshaw moved amid the unreality of a dream. That first glimpse of the old place, the merging of the dim memory into the vivid reality, had so overwhelmed him, disturbing such slumberous depths, arousing such unaccustomed processes in his consciousness, that, ever since, he had felt dazed, and he seemed to see everything now, in the re-action of that first shock, through the coloured mist of a dream. His memory, made strangely sensitive by contact with these familiar surroundings, kept throwing up a profusion of minute details, details never once thought of for over half a century. They would suddenly, for no apparent reason, leap up into his consciousness, fresh and vivid as growing flowers. At one moment

his memory suddenly affirmed that in a large cupboard at the top of the stairs there used to be a polished mahogany medicine-chest, its lid inlaid with a shell enclosed in a green ellipse: and, leaping further, memory asserted that in his childish mind this shell had been associated with two lines from a hymn:

From Greenland's icy mountains
To India's coral strand.

How absurd! And yet how real and how poignant the thing was!

At another moment the ghost of a woolwork stool embroidered with coloured roses on a black ground, emerged from oblivion: it was always to be found under the writing-table in the dining-room, and one of the embroidered roses had possessed for him a mysterious beauty which suggested what? He could not capture the association. It floated up to the very verge of his memory and then sank before he could identify it. Were both the medicine-chest and the footstool the fictions of his bewildered mind? He questioned Agnes and she took him to the cupboard and showed him the medicine-chest. The footstool too was still under the writing-table. Mr. Fanshaw gazed at them in amazement, as at things incredible, miraculous, trying in vain to grasp their reality. To him they were incredible not because they seemed unreal but because they seemed more than real. They were, in some strange way, vital parts of himself, and he could not stand away from them and envisage them coldly and sanely as objective material forms. How could he explain these curious sensations to Agnes? She would have thought him mad. Unbroken intercourse with all these familiar objects of their childhood must have blunted her sensitivity: for her, he felt, a footstool was a footstool and there was an end of it. But for himself it was different. It seemed almost as if he were the central consciousness through which all these old shadowy things, Agnes herself among them, floated in recurring procession.

And, besides this, his mind in these heavily-charged surroundings kept reproducing, as a series of lantern-slides, small, remote occurrences and adventures: the killing of the mouse in the

kitchen, whose small protesting hands and pink nose had filled a small boy with sudden remorse: the day when his shuttlecock had flown over the garden-wall and he had climbed the wall after it and, jumping down on the other side, had found himself in a wonderful unknown garden, and at the sounds of approaching voices he had hurried away through the bushes, pausing in his flight to gaze in wonder at a marvellous scarlet flower.

What a strange thing the mind was! It amused Mr. Fanshaw to sit and watch it at work, executing its kaleidescopic variations. It was amusing but it was also a little disquieting: it gave him a curious feeling of dizziness and irresponsibility. But, however that might be, he felt very happy in this haunting atmosphere which grew daily richer with new disclosures. It was as though time were subsiding before his eyes like the waters of a lake and above its surface the city of his childhood were pushing up higher and higher, sharply familiar but also strangely transformed into something mellower and richer, bright from its long immersion, mossed over with the glossy growths of more than half a century.

3.

Surrounded by these hosts of dreamlike memories, Mr. Fanshaw was never idle, never in need of entertainment. Each thing in the house was charged with a power for producing visions: he had only to touch it or contemplate it to set the process in motion. Though he was left alone all morning while Agnes attended to household affairs, though it rained incessantly for three days so that he could not go out, these things troubled him not at all.

On the fourth day the rain stopped and Agnes left him immediately after lunch to pay a visit to a friend. She left him comfortably ensconced in an armchair with a book on his knee. Mr. Fanshaw was contentedly aware that he had had an excellent lunch, that small busy flames were purring pleasantly in the grate, and that red reflections outlined the curved edges of the brass fender-rails. He took up his book and read a page or two and

again studied the behaviour of the fire with extreme satisfaction. Then, as he resumed his reading, he became conscious of a soft, continuous roar, a long hushing like a distant train. He knew the sound of old: it had come at infrequent intervals and had always brought with it a suggestion of something unusual and exciting. Mr. Fanshaw could not locate it among the sensations of his childhood. He listened to it again, and again a sharp but indefinable sensation rose in him. Then, all at once, he captured it. The river was in flood, the river that ran through the dene. He had quite forgotten the dene. Was it still there, he wondered, or had the trees been cut down, the wells filled, and this place too become an ugly slate-roofed suburb?

4.

The hushing filled the air as he descended the steep hawthorn-hedged lane that led down into the dene. The path was still cinder-paved and still among trees on the summit of the grass slope to the left stood the old weather-stained house which was said to be haunted. As he descended the steep incline his memory ran on before, and in a flash he recollected how near the further end of the dene a little green passage between dense thickets led away from the main path to open suddenly into a moss-floored circle hedged impenetrably round with hazels, in whose centre rose a great silvery tree-trunk, a pillar supporting the hanging roof of green boughs. He seemed to remember that as children they had christened this place the Labyrinth. There had always been something mysterious about it, a silent expectancy that was almost alarming. His visits to it had always stood, in the solemn make-believe of his young imagination, for the performance of a magic rite and, as he left it, he had always felt a disposition to run as though something were following him. What strange fancies children had! Grown-ups were always apt to forget these childish mysteries, unrealized echoes, probably, of august realities. And now he would be visiting the Labyrinth again.

The lane grew steeper and soon dropped abruptly on to a narrow wooden bridge, and as he emerged from between the hedges of the lane on to the hollow planking, the roar which still filled his ears suddenly opened out into a great hissing and Mr. Fanshaw seemed to be hung in mid-air. Far below, the stream swirled rapidly away from under him and he experienced a strange feeling of instability as though the foundations of things were melting beneath his feet. A fresh breeze enveloped him and stirred the leafless trees that climbed far above him up either side of the valley. As he leaned over the bridge he remembered that the wooden handrail used to be covered with carved initials and that it had rotted away where the iron clamps encircled it to fasten it to the rail-posts. As a child, he used always to scrape the moss out of the initials with a sharp pebble. But now the handrail was a new one, painted grey. The old one must have gone to pieces years ago. Under the swirling water he could see the little spit of land that ended in a great boulder from which he and his brother used to throw 'ducks-and-drakes' across the stream. The stream and the valley seemed to him now to have shrunk to half their former size.

The sun came out. A bloom of diaphanous violet lingered among far tree-trunks and in the distant hollows of the valley. As he followed the path upstream, Mr. Fanshaw tried to remember what lay round each bend, and the more he tried, the less he remembered; it was only when he gave up trying that he caught his mind fluently building up the unseen on the seen, foretelling what was coming in the next hundred yards from what had already appeared. A small red-tiled cottage with a stone-flagged garden-path, a little theatre of rock over whose steep face the stream dropped like a great pillar of blown glass into the seething bath below, rose in his memory with amazing clearness, and, five minutes later, the cottage itself, the waterfall itself, glided into view, vivid, baffling, unreal from excess of reality. Both had shrunk in size, but what they had lost in size it seemed that they had gained in intensity, for the tiled roof was unbelievably bright,

the column of the waterfall shone with the transparent greenness of a jewel, the whiteness of the water that boiled below gleamed like silk. It seemed as if his memory's vision of those things had been the plain reality and that this actuality before him were a vision bathed in the colours and sensations of a dream, too intense to last. And as his old brain fumbled among this bewildering interchange of inner and outer, of seen and imagined, in the mist that steamed up from the feet of the waterfall the bright apparition of a rainbow hovered for a moment and then faded.

What, he wondered as he went his way, was the reality of material things: for directly we envisage them, even for the first time, we have begun to overlay them with the colours and glosses of our own personalities. We see them only as our senses and our understanding interpret them to us in terms of other things akin to them which we already know, have already wrested out of their true being into forms apprehensible to us. And the more we study these things, the less, for us, they retain of their true selves. Therefore we can never know the true being of things: indeed if they remained locked in their true being we should not be aware of them at all. Surely then, he reflected, matter is but potentiality that waits for a human mind to endow it with being. And, losing his way in these dim pathways of thought, he gave up the search and, turning his attention outwards, he found that during his meditations he had followed a path that wound through dense undergrowth, among the tall trunks of oak-trees, and at once the Labyrinth came back into his mind. It was here, he felt sure, that the little passage turned off. But he could not find it and soon he began to doubt that this was the place. The path rose higher between denser undergrowth and again he thought that he was on the point of discovering the turning. But again his memory had deceived him and now the path emerged from the undergrowth and climbed a wooded slope. It was here, yes, here it was, that every spring they used to gather primroses. It was too early for primroses yet but, stooping down, he could detect the dark, crinkled leaves of innumerable primrose plants

among the grass. He reflected that nearly sixty generations of primroses must have flowered and withered since they had gathered them there. What a strange, monotonous, incomprehensible process it was. Birth, reproduction, death, round and round incessantly. Mankind was just the same, but mankind, it seemed, was unique in having a mind, a sort of immaterial mirror into which visions and sensations floated and mixed together and then faded. What on earth was the meaning of it all? Mr. Fanshaw looked round him feeling again blindly the presence of a reality which always evaded him behind these appearances of quiet trees, green grass, and the suffused violet of distance. The whole business was baffling, unfathomable, incomprehensible. It was like that perception of a mysterious expectancy in things which as a child he had experienced in the Labyrinth, and he felt about it too as he had felt this afternoon when searching for the Labyrinth, the sensation of being on the brink of a discovery which always escaped him.

Automatically, as if from long habit, his feet led him home by a short-cut which he had forgotten. He walked in a dream, bewildered, tired, but strangely happy in this mingling whirlpool of past and present, troubled only at not having found the Labyrinth. But, after all, perhaps the Labyrinth was only the memory of a dream or of some old story heard in infancy.

Now he was again level with the stream. His senses were again drowned in the long hiss of its swirling waters. He recrossed the high wooden bridge and began slowly to climb the cindered lane.

5.

When Agnes returned she found him asleep in the chair in which she had left him. He was muttering to himself about finding a Labyrinth. He awoke and stared at her.

‘Well, Alfred,’ she said, ‘I hope you have managed to amuse yourself.’

His gaze wandered round the room, uncertain, puzzled.

'I believe I have been asleep,' he said.

'Asleep all afternoon?' asked Agnes.

'I . . . I believe so,' replied Mr. Fanshaw.

Then suddenly Agnes pointed at his boots. 'Why, I declare, Alfred,' she exclaimed. 'How can you tell such fibs? You've been out. Your boots are covered with mud.'

Mr. Fanshaw glanced at his boots. There was mud on them, sure enough, and he noticed now that his legs ached, that he was pleasantly tired.

'And where did you go for your walk?' asked Agnes.

The old man gazed at her with profound, unseeing eyes. Then his mind, tired and perplexed amid all this fluctuation of real and unreal, gave up the struggle. It was as though a passing wind blurred the clear pool of his memory.

'Will you believe me, Agnes,' he replied, 'when I tell you that I don't know.'

THE UNCOMFORTABLE EXPERIENCE
OF MR. PERKINS & MR. JOHNSON

THE UNCOMFORTABLE EXPERIENCE OF MR. PERKINS & MR. JOHNSON

THREE WERE ONCE TWO GENTLEMEN called Mr. Perkins and Mr. Johnson who were great travellers. And they travelled so far and into lands so foreign and uncouth that they found themselves at last in a country full of devils and wizards and in an hotel without a bathroom. 'And so,' said they, 'we must go to the public baths.'

So they went to the public baths. And as they sat in the waiting-room, waiting until baths should be vacant for them, they fell into a dilemma as to how each should know when the other had finished bathing. And at length Mr. Perkins, being the more resourceful of the two, propounded the following scheme. 'If,' said he, 'I do not find you in this waiting-room when I have finished my bath, I shall gather that you have not finished yours. But if, on the other hand, I find you sitting here already, I shall conclude that you have finished and that we can both go away without more ado.'

'But what about me?' asked Mr. Johnson.

'That,' answered Mr. Perkins, 'is equally simple. For if you find me waiting, you may be sure that I have already finished and that we can go away forthwith: but if you do not find me here you will know that I am still in my bathroom and you will sit down and wait for me patiently.'

Mr. Johnson thought for a moment. 'But what am I to think,' said he, 'if I find someone sitting here who is not you?'

'That,' answered Mr. Perkins, 'will have no bearing on the case.'

No sooner had Mr. Perkins thus made all things plain, than the keeper of the baths came to say that two bathrooms were now

ready, and Mr. Perkins and Mr. Johnson went into their allotted bathrooms and the doors were closed.

But in his bathroom Mr. Johnson was assailed by perplexing thoughts and ruminations, so that the delight of sliding into hot water was blunted for him and the delicious sense of emerging into cleanliness was benumbed, for he kept saying to himself: 'Something may occur in this matter for which we have not made provision.'

But after that space of time which is necessary for the achievement of perfect cleanliness, Mr. Johnson issued from his bathroom and proceeded down the passage to the waiting-room: and he could see in the waiting-room a pair of legs protruding from a chair. And he said to himself: 'Those are the legs of Perkins, who has been sparing with the soap and so has finished first.'

But when he had reached the waiting-room and looked into the chair he sprang back with a loud and fearful exclamation, for—horror of horrors—seated in that chair was not Perkins but his very self, to wit, Johnson. And he became cold all over.

But when he had collected himself a little, he approached that Other in the chair, which was himself, and, by way of clearing things up, asked it: 'Are you by any chance, waiting for me?'

'Do not ask foolish questions,' replied the Other. 'For how can a man wait for himself? I am waiting for Perkins, as we arranged three-quarters-of-an-hour ago before going to our baths.'

'But I too arranged in a similar way to wait for Perkins,' said Johnson.'

'That,' said the Other, 'cannot be, because no third party was involved.'

At these words Mr. Johnson shuddered, for it seemed that his identity was slipping away from him. Then he remembered that the number of his bathroom was 13, and the remembrance of that number came to him as a ray of hope, for if he could prove that he and he alone had occupied that bathroom during the last three-quarters-of-an-hour, it would surely be some sort of a proof of his identity. So, trembling with eagerness, he asked the Other:

'Tell me, what was the number of your bathroom?'

'The number of my bathroom,' said the other, 'was 13. I left it ten minutes ago.'

Again Mr. Johnson shuddered and the horror of madness came upon him, for now it seemed that his identity hung by the merest thread. 'At least,' he said finally, 'when Perkins comes out we shall hear from his own lips which of us he is looking for.'

Now as they talked, a third person had come from one of the bathrooms into the waiting-room. He was a tall person, with beard, moustaches, and eyebrows of an extreme fierceness, and he sat and watched the other two and listened to their conversation with a saturnine amusement.

But after a few minutes a bolt was shot, the door opened, and Perkins came out into the passage and so to the waiting-room.

Instantly Johnson and the Other arose and, speaking in perfect unison, they asked him: 'Which of us, Perkins, are you looking for?'

But Perkins scowled at the two and replied: 'I am looking for neither of you, but for Johnson here.' And, taking the arm of the fierce-looking gentleman who had also risen, he disappeared with him into the street without further parley, leaving those two others with open mouths and staring eyes.

And after they had managed to pull themselves together, they discussed the situation at some length: and the results of their discussion were, firstly that, whichever of them was Johnson and whichever was not, at least it was certain that he with whom Perkins had departed was emphatically not Johnson: and secondly that both of themselves were obviously the real Johnson, unhappily split into two by some local devilry. And they laid their heads together as to how to reduce themselves to unity again. And finally they decided to draw lots and that the one on whom the lot fell should return to number 13 bathroom and drown himself in the bath. So Johnson and the Other drew lots: and the lot fell to the Other. And they repaired to number 13 bathroom and, with the help of Johnson, the Other drowned himself in the bath

as arranged. And as the bubbles ceased to rise, Johnson felt himself invaded by a flood of energy and reassurance, and he smacked himself on the chest, saying: 'Good! I feel that I am quite myself again.' So saying, he drew out the plug of the bath and the Other passed out through the waste-pipe.

Then taking his hat and stick, Mr. Johnson hurried out to the rescue of Mr. Perkins who, bewitched by some local devilry, had so unfortunately gone out for a walk with a wizard disguised as a gentleman with fierce eyebrows.

A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW

A BIRD'S - EYE VIEW

MR. BISCO SAT IN THE MORNING-ROOM reading the paper. Mrs. Bisco stood at the table near the window arranging flowers. The sun spread a large pool of light on the floor at Mr. Bisco's feet and laid brilliant splashes on the copper coal-box and on the pewter dish on the mantelpiece above it. Outside, the jackdaws circled in the sunny air round the massive church-tower and perched on its pinnacles. The scarlets and golds of autumn flowers glowed in the long border that edged the Biscos' lawn, and across the low wall beyond it the crowded gravestones of the churchyard looked almost gay under the mature autumn sunshine.

In the morning-room there was complete silence, except when Mrs. Bisco poured water into one of her vases or snapped a too long chrysanthemum stalk, or when a South American revolution or the madness of contemporary politics caused the paper in Mr. Bisco's hands to crackle spasmodically. Then all at once he bounced in his chair.

‘Why, bless my soul!’ he exclaimed; ‘look here! “A marriage has been arranged and will shortly take place.” . . .’

‘Yes, dear, I know,’ said his wife soothingly.

‘Well, really . . . I . . . I . . . and her husband hardly cold in his grave over the wall there!’

‘It’s over a year ago, George,’ said Mrs. Bisco.

‘A year! And what’s a year? Scandalous, I call it! Monstrous!’

‘Surely *scandalous* and *monstrous* are rather strong, dear; and, after all, isn’t it their own affair?’

‘Really, Louisa, you astonish me!’ replied Mr. Bisco, assuming the appearance of a Cochin China cock. ‘Upon my word, I believe it means no more to you than one of these South American

squabbles that are always cropping up in the papers. I should have thought you would have had more respect for the memory of poor old Belford.'

'Don't be so foolish, George! All I mean is that one ought not to judge these things without first knowing all the circumstances; and we do not know all the circumstances.'

'Personally, I know all I want to know. I know that the woman has run off and married again before—before her husband is cold in his grave over the wall there.'

'And you feel that, if he knew, it would pain him. But you can't tell, George.'

'Surely I can believe my own eyes. You couldn't point me out a kinder husband than poor old Belford was.'

'Quite true, dear; everyone knows they were excellent friends, but that may have been all. Suppose she always loved the other man better?'

'Love someone better than your husband? Monstrous! She ought to be ashamed of herself!'

'Possibly, dear. But isn't it rather difficult to choose in these matters? So long as she gave him no cause for unhappiness—'

'It's no use, Louisa. These imaginary excuses are all very well, but . . . Well, it's not the thing. I—I strongly disapprove.'

'My dear,' said Louisa, bringing a vase of chrysanthemums to the little table at his elbow, 'you'll always be a child as long as you live. Don't bother yourself with the newspaper, but go out into the sun.'

Mr. Bisco strolled out of the French window and down the lawn. From time to time he snorted indignantly, although if you had asked him what he was indignant about, it would already have cost him an effort to remember. He remembered, however, that he was indignant, and that, after all, was enough. But a sparrow came and took a dust-bath among his new begonias and made him forget even *that*. Then, glancing after the sparrow's flight over the wall, his eye fell on Belford's grave, and he began to snort again. As usual, there were flowers on the grave—white

chrysanthemums, like those which his wife had put on his table just now. But to-day those on the grave were not fresh. 'She is too taken up with other things, of course,' he said to himself, and snorted again. His wife called him from the house.

'George, if you are going for a walk before lunch, you had better go now; it's after twelve.'

Every day Mr. Bisco went for a walk before lunch, and every day he forgot to start until his wife reminded him; and when she did, Mr. Bisco invariably replied, 'God bless my soul! I'd no idea it was so late.' He always took the same direction, because he preferred, even in so unimportant a matter, to be methodical. But on this occasion, as he passed the church gate, he met John Pride, the sexton.

'Good morning, John,' he said.

'Good morning, sir,' replied John. 'I left the keys in the tower door, sir, if you think of goin' up.' It was then that Mr. Bisco remembered that, sitting in his garden on the previous day, he had suddenly experienced a desire to be on the top of the church tower. It seemed strange that he had never thought of it before during the past twenty years, and now that he *had* he felt ashamed of his ignorance of the top of the tower. Suppose some stranger had questioned him about it, he would have had to make a discreditable evasion. Clearly, he owed it to himself to climb the tower, and without delay, and he spoke to John about it when he met him a few hours later.

Therefore Mr. Bisco now answered: 'Thank you, John, thank you. Yes, I'll go now.' And as he skirted the porch and made for the tower door he felt the thrill of one on the brink of an adventure. It would be quite an event. He imagined himself saying to Louisa at lunch: 'Well, and where do you think I've been this morning?'

The climb was easier than he had expected, and soon he emerged puffing into the dazzling sunshine on the leaded roof. What a large area it seemed, and how tall the pinnacles were—twice as tall as he had imagined! He approached the parapet with

the curiosity of a child and gazed cautiously over. Beneath him sprawled the grey roof of the church, and all round it clustered the little red roofs of the village, for all the world like a collection of Noah's arks. Gradually he began to distinguish familiar houses. There was Jackson the joiner's. And there was Jackson himself moving white planks in his yard. That gleaming streak on the western horizon—could it be the sea? It must be. He swelled with pride at the thought of having seen the sea. There below, to the left, lay the vicarage. And there, on the front drive, was the vicar's spaniel pup playing by itself. Mr. Bisco laughed to see it indulging in extravagant antics, apparently for no reason, since it was all alone. He had always supposed that dogs reserved such exhibitions for the entertainment of their owners. Certainly the top of a tower was a delightful place. As he gazed benevolently down on the earth beneath, he felt unusually pleased with existence.

Then suddenly he thought of his own house. It took him a moment or two to locate it, although it was close to the church. How strange it looked from this aspect! He could see the whole roof plan at a single glance. It looked quite imposing; he felt proud of such an expanse of tiles. Then he saw his wife come out on to the lawn. She went to the herbaceous border and began to gather more chrysanthemums. He chuckled to himself. It seemed somehow comical that she should be so utterly unconscious of his scrutiny. It was as amusing as it had been a few minutes before to watch the vicar's spaniel pup. But what was she carrying in the other hand? Surely it was the morning-room footstool. He saw her glance back at the house end then hurry, flowers in one hand, footstool in the other, to the wall. Then she put down the footstool and, using it as a step, got up on to the wall and so over into the churchyard. Something stirred behind him, startling him, and he glanced round guiltily. It was only a jackdaw fluttering off one of the pinnacles. When he looked again his wife was kneeling beside a grave—Belford's grave; yes, unmistakably Belford's—hastily removing the dead flowers and arranging in their

place the fresh ones she had gathered. For a moment Mr. Bisco lost all consciousness of external things. The four pinnacles, the lead roof, the parapet over which he had been leaning, all ceased to exist for him and he floundered about in a sea of conflicting emotions. Then suddenly coming to himself, he found, to his surprise, that he was still on the top of the tower. He seemed, within the last three minutes, to have gone through the experience of a week. Pulling himself together, he climbed in at the low door and made his way down the winding stairs. Below he met John.

'I say, John,' he stammered, 'do me the favour not to mention the fact that I've been up the tower. It might get to Mrs. Bisco's ears. She wouldn't like it. Thinks the climb too much for me. Women have strange ideas.' And as he walked slowly home he felt as one who, after watching the reflections of clouds and branches on the surface of a pond, has received a sudden glimpse into the vague depths below. He felt half afraid of facing his wife thus suddenly transformed for him; and she wondered to herself why he patted her shoulder half timidly, half tenderly, when they met in the hall.

OLD ALAN

O L D A L A N

AS LONG AS ANYONE IN THE VILLAGE could remember, old Alan had been a casual labourer. He was to be seen haymaking, carting, gardening, hedging, clearing ditches, road-scraping, or stone-breaking as season and opportunity offered. He appeared and disappeared fitfully, and no one could be said to know him. Though he did not shun conversation, he was never the one to speak first. You felt afraid of speaking to him lest you should frighten him away, and you also felt that to speak to him would be like speaking to a squirrel—you would simply not be understood. Little was known of his manner of life beyond the fact that he occupied a cottage a mile out on the highway, for he never appeared in those social centres of the village, the cattle-market, the church, and the Golden Lion. His life was secret like the squirrel's: folk looked upon him as a familiar object of the countryside rather than as a human being, and his elusiveness, like the squirrel's, was put down to a natural shyness rather than to moroseness or hatred of mankind.

It was impossible to guess old Alan's age. The red, weather-beaten face; the loose, puckered mouth; the little bright half-obsequious, half-humorous eyes; the unkempt hair which appeared sometimes grey and sometimes sandy, might equally well have belonged to a young man of sixty-five or a prematurely old man of forty. But, whatever his age, the prefix old was so obviously right that nobody ever spoke of Alan alone but always of old Alan, indeed on more than one occasion the name had been written Oldalan.

Old Alan, then, was not so much a human being as a sort of familiar sprite, a detail of the unchanging order of things, so that it was a matter for universal astonishment when on a certain

occasion he went off to the next parish, apparently on a one day's job, and returned married. The sensation caused in the village was as great as if the Golden Lion had been burnt down. It was incredible that all this while they had not, as they had believed, completely known old Alan as they knew the houses and trees about them: that he apparently had, besides his visible life, a secret, unsuspected existence of thoughts, emotions, and schemes, like other folk who love, hate, marry, beget children, and die. The established idea of him had apparently been incorrect, or rather perhaps, he had suddenly deviated from his true nature. The only person who showed no surprise was old Alan himself. On the day after the wedding he was to be seen going about his work precisely the same as before, nor did he once refer to the event. Gossip remarked that it was a wonder that he could afford to keep a wife and it was generally agreed that he must have money put by.

As soon as the village got accustomed to the idea of old Alan married, gossip admitted that it was natural that he should want a woman to look after him, that indeed the wonder was that he should have done without one for so long. This admission is of importance, for it indicates a change of attitude towards old Alan. It implies that he was now accepted as actually human, with the needs and feelings of a human being, and it also implies that gossip had altered the previously accepted idea and had constructed a wider conception of old Alan capable of containing him in his new aspect. And it is a fact that after his marriage his nature did undergo a modification. He was still a squirrel, but now he was a tame squirrel: it was possible to get closer to him, and this closer approach revealed unsuspected richnesses in old Alan. It was discovered that he was full of profound country wisdom. He could tell you the one infallible way to exterminate rats, he knew how to dress moleskins, how to make elderberry wine, how to stamp out disease in potatoes. He was deeply versed in the strange and secret ways of birds and animals, winds and seasons. He could tell you exactly where to dig for water, and if you asked

him how he had discovered it he would tell you that he hadn't discovered it, that he just *knew*.

It was found also that there was something strangely attractive about old Alan: it was either his comically pleasant face, his twinkling blue eye, or some magnetic aura of happiness which radiated from him like the nimbus of a saint. Whatever it was, it caused people who met him to experience a sensation of sudden happiness, a pleasure half like that of meeting an old friend, half like that of coming suddenly upon some beautiful wild creature—a squirrel seated pertly on a beech-bough, a kingfisher gleaming on a stake in mid-stream.

As before, old Alan never spoke unless spoken to, nor did he seem to want to be spoken to. But now it was you who spoke. He merely went on with his work and inevitably you stopped and spoke to him: and immediately you seemed to have tapped a spring of rich humanity, for old Alan talked with a quiet ingenuousness, a quaint and coloured humour, a happy self-possession equally without shyness and without presumption. You went on your way feeling warmed and invigorated and, as you went, you felt that old Alan never looked after you but that he serenely continued his work, forgetting you as the pool forgets the bather.

Under this new aspect old Alan settled down and gossip forgot the momentary disturbance caused by his marriage.

But old Alan had not exhausted his power of surprising the village, for within a year of his marriage a son and heir appeared in the cottage. There was somehow something comical in the idea of old Alan as a father. For the second time he had disturbed the traditional conception of him, a conception which, apparently, excluded the idea of fatherhood. The village was interested and amused, and again the only person who was not amused, who did not feel the thing to be comical, was old Alan himself.

This event again had the effect of modifying old Alan's nature. More and more he was becoming a gregarious human being, subject to doctor and parson, and when, shortly after the birth of the child, he abandoned casual labour and appeared as

under-gardener to the squire, his humanization seemed complete. He was no longer a will-o'-the-wisp flitting fitfully from place to place, but a man with a fixed point of activity, fixed hours of work, and fixed wage. He even appeared occasionally at the Golden Lion to drink a pint of beer and talk to his kind.

Yet even now he was not as other men, for whereas before he had seemed less human than the rest, he now seemed more human. Those richly human qualities of his, that strong but indefinable attraction, were no longer to be encountered only unexpectedly and at more or less rare intervals: they were now continually accessible. Members of the squire's household would unconsciously take the path near where old Alan happened to be working, in preference to another, so as to be able to exchange a word with him in passing. The squire and his wife each unconsciously invented countless excuses for speaking to him.

And it was not merely what old Alan said that so warmed the cockles of your heart: it was also his voice, his straight blue glance, his frank, polite, diffident yet paternal way, a certain golden quality of mind, warm, clear and serene like music, which appealed at once to the best in you. When difficulties arose—when the pup started with distemper, when a bees' nest was found in the roof, when dry rot appeared in the timbers of the barn, old Alan was consulted and the difficulty vanished. It seemed as if some bright sun-god had taken the form of an under-gardener to bless the village with a brief visit.

Old Alan himself, too, was as happy as could be. It was all because of the child. The child absorbed his thoughts. It was for the child's sake that he had resolved to take a permanent job, and as he raked the drive or weeded the flower-beds he was continually making golden plans for the child's future. For him, the child was a miracle: he would gaze at it in an ecstasy for which time and space had ceased to be.

Old Alan's sojourn in the civilized world lasted four years. During four years that serene and radiant creature worked unobtrusively in the squire's garden and moved quietly among men

and women of the village, sometimes carrying the child or leading it by the small upstretched hand as it trotted busily behind him.

But one morning old Alan failed to appear. He arrived in the afternoon shy and woe-begone. The child was ill. He had been for the doctor and the doctor could not say what was the matter. Old Alan's trouble spread through the entire household. They could not bear to see him like this, his face drawn and pallid, the bright humorous eyes clouded and scared. Anxiety had quite unmanned him. He gazed at them like a wounded animal: the change in him from the old Alan they knew sent a chill to their hearts.

Next day again he did not come. The child was worse. In the afternoon the squire's wife went over to the cottage. Old Alan was sitting by the small bed. He had sat there, his wife said, all night and all that morning. He looked up once only as the squire's wife entered to hold up a finger for silence and then at once resumed his agonized watch.

That evening the child died

For weeks after that old Alan led a wandering existence, coming home occasionally for a night and disappearing next morning without a word. Sometimes he came home with his clothing soaked and stained as though he had passed the night in the woods. One day the squire's wife, in her carriage, met him tramping down a road fifteen miles from the village. She stopped the carriage and got out. At first he seemed hardly to recognise her, but it ended by his returning with her in the carriage, and when she left him at his cottage he had promised to come back to the garden next day.

And next day they saw him in the avenue, a forlorn automaton, sweeping the fallen chestnut leaves. He laboured blindly, often sweeping where no leaves lay, as though the physical action alone were remembered and the sense and object of it forgotten.

He came regularly to the garden for three days and then again he vanished. Now that the child, the only reason for his visit to the civilized world, had departed, he could not be persuaded to remain.

Later he reappeared fitfully in his old haunts, now here, now there, clipping fences, clearing ditches, mending the thatch of barns, and those who stopped to speak to him found the same attraction, the same rich humanity, even the same serenity, but there was also a deep tinge of melancholy, softening them and muting them as it were, as though a light had been extinguished in his mind. Once more he was a thing apart. The village saw him no more: his social significance had fallen from him and he was once again the shy but familiar haunter of country places, the elusive sprite of woods and fields, appearing less and less frequently among the homes of men. And long after the date of his death it was not known whether he had actually died or only vanished deeper into the country.

THE MAGIC CARPET

T H E M A G I C C A R P E T

RUSSELL'S UNCLE HAD ACHIEVED perfection in the art of giving a present, for not only did he give it in the form of a cheque but he went on to stipulate that the cheque should be spent on something entirely useless. He knew Russell's taste to a nicety, so that he could himself have made an infallibly successful choice of a watercolour, a statuette or a book. But the perfection of the uncle's art consisted also in the fact that he gave not only the ultimate object chosen but all those racking emotions which he knew Russell would go through in the choosing.

And, true enough, it kept Russell going for a week. During that week he went about in a fever of torturing uncertainties, delicious temptations, agonized renunciations, delightful anticipations. Wherever he went, a troop of bright visions attended him. For the first two days he merely took stock, flitting from shop-window to shop-window, flattening his nose against the glass, sometimes obscuring the objects of his inspection by the haze of his excited breathing on the pane. He took his meals in a dream, unconscious of what he was eating: he collided with people in the streets and frequently failed to answer when spoken to. After he had turned out the light and got into bed he reviewed all the salient objects of the day's inspection, compared, rejected, filtered, and finally went to sleep in the small hours of the morning in a confused whirl of glowing fantasies.

Awaking after two days and two nights of this distracting existence, he found that he had achieved some sort of definition. The thing chosen must have colour, strong, arresting colour, and sharp and significant line. This at once threw overboard all literature, etchings, engravings, and all the plastic art that is without colour.

Awaking after the third day and night, he found that the definition had not only clarified to the point of articulating varieties of actual objects to be chosen from but had further reduced these varieties to three. It had been settled that the thing would have to be either an Oriental rug, a Japanese print, or a piece of Venetian glass.

His inquisition of shop-windows now became highly specialized and he returned home on the fourth evening having narrowed his hunting-ground for Japanese prints to a single shop whose window seemed to display the finest specimens, and furthermore having reduced his Oriental rug-hunt and his Venetian glass-hunt not only to single windows but to single objects in those windows.

The goblet of Venetian glass which had taken his fancy was unquestionably a fine specimen. At the centre of a base of yellow glass like an inverted saucer, three yellow dragons powdered with gold stood on their hind-legs, springing outwards with pawing forefeet and lolling tongues and supporting on their heads a great serene bubble of purple glass. The upward curve of the sides turned inwards towards the lip. Russell's facile imagination asserted that it was a frozen bubble of wine or a newly-opened water-lily on the deeply-shadowed edge of a tropical lake. Whichever it was, it was very expensive.

Then, the same afternoon, he had discovered the rug. He spotted it hanging among several others, in the window of a shop recommended to him by a friend, and it was the others which first attracted his attention by the brilliance of their colours. It was a Kelim rug of elaborate and fantastic geometrical design. Its only colours at first sight seemed to be white and black in bold alternation. Then, as Russell looked into it more attentively, he saw that the white composed the ground on which the black was scored in a bold, many-hooked pattern, and that besides this the rug had an indented border of brick-red and brick-red appeared within the rug in a notched pattern alternating with the black. and soon Russell found that the other rugs had grown vulgar and

garish and that this Kelim rug was rich, distinguished, severe, a thoroughbred among rugs. He had actually gone so far as to enter the shop and ask the price. The price was within his reach. The shopman had brought the rug from the window and had showed some others of the same kind. Russell kindled with delight, his heart beat fast, he pursed his lips like a gourmet over a fine Port, and as he compared one with another his preference hovered in torment between rug and rug. But whenever he returned to that first rug it always asserted its superiority unmistakably, supremely. He left the shop, a prey to acute nervous excitement, saying that he would think it over. He felt almost sure about the rug, but still he would look at other things before deciding. What a tragedy if he were rashly to buy the rug and afterwards discover that what he ought to have bought was a Japanese print. A taxi which almost ran him down brought to his notice the fact that he was walking rapidly in the wrong direction. He turned about and hurried towards home.

On the way he passed the Venetian goblet. 'Not much of a thing,' he said to himself: yet he glanced back at it as he hastened on.

As he lay in bed that night, the goblet regained some of its lost glory. The purple bubble swam before him, burning and fading and burning again: the golden dragons expanded into great symbolical monsters, terrible and sublime. But then came a sense of something fiercely and splendidly barbaric, before which the dragons shrank and the burning bubble faded. It was the rug.

Next morning it was settled. The goblet was definitely *off*. It only remained for him to guard against a final error by a visit to the Japanese print shop. The print shop turned out to be an agonising proposition. Print after print was set before him, miracles of colour, balance, and singing line. Over each Russell hovered desperately in an ecstasy of indecision. At length he noticed that he was returning with most frequency to Hiroshige's *Monkey Bridge*. He inspected it more carefully.

On either side of the picture rose a sharp perspective of straw-coloured cliffs whose fluted faces swung outwards towards the

base. Between them swirled a stream of bright blue water in parallel bands of lighter and darker shade which curled and uncurled deliciously in the eddying of the current. The gorge was spanned by the arc of a little bridge and over the top of either cliff leaned tufted maple-bushes in a shower of autumnal scarlet. Far off, seen in the gap framed between the cliff-walls, beyond green fields and piney knolls and groups of pigmy huts, delicately carved mounds of blue hills stood against a luminous yellow sky. The print was a wonder of delicate precision and delightful colour.

Russell cast a lingering glance at the others and returned to *The Monkey Bridge* sweating under the stress of selection. 'It will be that one if it's any,' he told the print-seller and staggered from the shop, a broken man.

He thought of the rug. How harsh it seemed now with its black, white, and red. There was no warmth in it, no mellow-ness, but a coldness, a fierceness that repelled him. After lunch he fled to the rug-shop blinded by visions of Japanese prints, like Orestes pursued by Furies.

The rug was still in the window and at the first glance the prints faded into thin air, so great was the spell of it. Every doubt vanished in a flash: all was certainty and security. He felt as though he had come out of a jungle of dark perplexity on to the sunny highway of perfect wisdom. He hastened to the shop-door. It was locked. He had forgotten that it was a half-holiday.

Now he would have to wait till the following afternoon, for he would be occupied all next morning. Throughout that evening and the next morning Russell fretted and chafed like a caged leopard. His peace of mind, his joy in life, were woven into the patterns of that rug and, separated from it, he was tormented, lost.

Next day at the first possible moment he was back at the shop. He burst in, breathless. 'I have decided to take that rug,' he panted.

'The Kelim, sir?' replied the shopman. 'I'm sorry: it was sold this morning.'

Russell's world crashed about his ears. He stared stupidly at the shopman, stammered something incoherent and fled from the shop.

At home he flung himself into a chair and lay with hanging arms and sprawling legs, dazed and disillusioned. Life for him was empty and juiceless as a sucked orange. Towards evening he slunk out and bought *The Monkey Bridge*

The Monkey Bridge had hung on the wall of his sitting room for a fortnight. For a fortnight its pure and lively colour and the suavity and sureness of its drawing called to him in vain, for whenever he seemed on the point of savouring to the full the wonder and the beauty of it, the memory of the Kelim rug surged up and enveloped him like a sheet of flame. It seemed to him now, as he studied it in his mind's eye, to summarize all the richness, the mystery, the cruelty, the barbaric splendour of the East. Now it appeared to him as the pelt of a conventionalized green-glancing puma, now its bold patterns were the dark hieroglyphics on an ancient and half-comprehended palimpsest. He felt that in losing it he had lost everything, or rather, the cipher without which everything was meaningless.

At the end of that fortnight he met the friend who had recommended the rug-shop. 'I want you to dine with me tomorrow,' said the friend: 'I have a new rug to show you.'

'A rug?' shrieked Russell. 'Red, white and black? A Kelim rug?'

'How the devil do you know that?' asked the friend.

Then it was he, his friend, who had snatched the precious rug from his grasp, who had withered up his life in a single afternoon.

Russell accepted the invitation and duly presented himself on the following evening. In reply to his frantic enquiries after the rug his friend led him into the drawing room. At the door, Russell braced himself for the plunge, the awful gulp of remorse, torture, and misery.

One glance was enough. The rug was *nothing*. A charming thing, indeed a beautiful thing, but a beautiful thing among a

hundred others: nothing at all to compare with the miracle into which his excited imagination had transformed it.

On his return to his rooms Russell switched on the light. Opposite him hung *The Monkey Bridge*, beautiful beyond all comparison with the rug. He took it down tenderly from the wall, laid it on the table, and bent ardently over it like a lover.

9 FABLES

N I N E F A B L E S

I.

The Snowflake

THE POET AKHMED LIVED IN A TOWN SET in a green oasis in the thirsty desert, where he inhabited a tower high above the lowly roofs of the town: and, similarly, his mind dwelt upon the calm summits of Imagination above the paltry bickerings of the townsfolk. Now one morning in the winter, as Akhmed sat on his tower in meditation upon the Infinite, a sudden sharp wind fluttered the hair of his forehead and out of the wind there dropped a petal of cherry-blossom and lit on the parapet beside him; but when he looked more closely he saw that it was not a petal but a snowflake. And he was very much surprised, because snow never fell in that country. And he remained all day entranced before the delicate perfection of the thing. And when the women called him to dinner, he called back:—‘Go away. I want no dinner, for I have found the Eternal Verity which is more than breakfast, dinner, or tea.’ And when the next day dawned, Akhmed was still in contemplation upon his tower. And the news spread like smoke through the town that Akhmed the poet had found the Eternal Verity: consequently the town pundits called to congratulate him. And when they came out, puffing and blowing, into the keen, pure air on the top of the tower, they found Akhmed sitting there, gazing at the snowflake. But as soon as they set eyes on the flake, they began to argue about the beauty of it. ‘Its beauty,’ said one, ‘is entirely scientific, for it consists in the rigidly mechanical process whereby vapour, under given conditions, is transformed into the substance called snow’.

'On the contrary,' said another, 'the scientific aspect of the thing has nothing to do with its beauty. The beauty lies in the form, the exquisitely balanced filigree, which constitutes the flake.' Another would have it that the beauty lay rather in the whole episode than in the snowflake itself—the dramatic arrival of the flake, fallen out of the void as a drop of wisdom out of the eternal Mind into the mind of man. A fourth laughed aloud at all these ideas. 'Its beauty,' he said, 'lies in none of those fancy notions, but purely and simply in its utility: for, as is well-known, if a sufficient quantity of these flakes be brought together, excellent ice-creams can be made at a trifling expense.'

But hearing all these theories springing up around him, Akhmed too was seduced into the argument, and soon he was labouring to give reasons for the miracle of the snowflake. And the whole lot of them wrangled together so that the townspeople in all the streets stood still and gazed up in wonder, thinking that a menagerie had got loose upon the tower. 'But,' shouted the voice of Akhmed above the hubbub, 'you have only to look at the thing . . . , ' and he and the rest turned to do so. But when they looked, there was nothing to look at, for the snowflake had melted half-an-hour ago in that hot and fetid outpouring of vain breath.

II.

The Priest & the Poet

A POET AND A PRIEST ONCE FELL INTO conversation. 'There are certain statements in your sacred books,' said the poet, 'which I am unable to believe. For instance, your god, so I read, was born of a rock. He produced a supply of water by striking the rock with an arrow and concluded an alliance with the sun.'

The priest was eloquent and the poet patient, nor was his mind encumbered with scientific knowledge: so that at the end of eight hours and forty five minutes he was easily convinced on all points.

Some days later it chanced that they met again and the priest hailed the poet as *convert*.

'Good-morning,' answered the poet: 'but why *convert*?'

'Why?' the priest replied, 'did you not assure me last Thursday that I had removed all those doubts of yours?'

'I did,' said the poet. 'But you are wrong in concluding that I propose to change my religion merely because you entertained me on Thursday by explaining certain peculiar physical facts connected with yours.'

III.

The Inquisitive Man

THREE-QUARTERS of the distance down the Milky Way and the first to the left after that) which is tastefully laid out with gardens and fountains, hills and forests. And somewhere near the middle of it stands a building with a pillared porch and a green front door with a large brass bell-pull at the side of it. And everyone is very happy on the planet, for living is cheap and the weather is good and there is nothing whatever to worry about. So that folk spend their time in a wise enjoyment of the blessings about them.

But there lived on that planet a certain man who turned up his nose at the blessings and spent all his days pealing that front door bell. But no one ever answered the bell so that he got precious little satisfaction out of this occupation. And occasionally people would interrupt him and say: 'No one has ever come out of that door nor has anyone ever got in. Why bother?' Or, 'There is nothing inside, so why not leave it and come for a picnic?' or again, 'The building was built, like the fountains and terraces, purely for decoration. Look at it, therefore, and enjoy it, but don't, for goodness' sake, worry yourself about it.' But he took no notice of these wise remarks, but continued to peal and peal the bell with short intervals for meals and sleep.

At last, when he had been continuing this mode of existence for about seventy years, a sage approached him and said: 'Why not go round to the back?' And the man, having stared at the sage in amazement, replied: 'By gad, Sir, I will.' And he did. And at the back he found another door, precisely like the front door, and over it was written: 'THIS WAY FOR PARADISE,' and the key was in the door. Then the man, with a great leap of

the heart, turned the key and flung open the door. And when the door was open he discovered that it was actually that on the other side of which he had spent his life in waiting, for the building was no house but merely a sort of ornamental wall. And so, a little mortified, he prepared to join the others. But unfortunately he was now eighty-seven years of age which happened to be his allotted span. So he died that evening, before having had the opportunity of enjoying himself at all.

IV.

Eternity & Infinity

AMONG THE PUBLIC-MEN OF A CERTAIN pleasant town there were two philosophers, whose job it was to do a little tidying-up in the mental department just as the sanitary authorities did for the thoroughfares and drains. And one of them superintended the Time Section and the other the Space Section. And in the course of their labours, both of them very soon, as was inevitable, bumped up against Eternity and Infinity. Being a little upset by this, they held a conference and decided that the thing must be properly investigated and explained, 'because,' they said, 'if it turns out that mankind has no share in either of these spheres, then what's the good of anything? We might as well, in that case, shut up shop and commit suicide.' So they agreed together to investigate each his proper branch. Accordingly, the Space gentlemen, with the help of a foot-rule, an aeroplane, and a powerful telescope, proceeded forthwith to the extreme bound of space, where he found himself on the brink of a blind precipice. But fortunately he had brought with him some string and a grappling-iron; so he lowered the grappling-iron into the abyss and fished about. And after a while he reeled up the iron and found in it a large smooth pebble. And immediately he fell into a great despair, for this conclusively proved that Infinity was closed to mankind, since otherwise the stone would have been a worked stone or else a brick baked by the hand of man.

Similarly the Time gentleman, by the deft manipulation of a slide-rule, one or two logarithms, and an Ingersoll watch, transported himself in no time to the brink of Eternity, and beneath his feet the boundless Ocean of Eternity rolled embarrassingly

to and fro. But by a happy coincidence he too had string in his pocket and a grappling-iron and with them he quickly made the same desolating discovery as his Space colleague. And so they returned home disconsolate with their pebbles, and each put his pebble on his bedroom-mantelpiece, for what else can one do with a pebble?

Now, when they had talked things over, it became clear that suicide was the only thing for it, and they shut themselves up for a fortnight in order to discover the best method of committing suicide. But when they emerged from this retirement, they found that a great many letters had accumulated on the hall-table, and as they tore open one after another they learned that the Countess of Hydeseek, Lady Lamprey, Mrs. Fitzwilmington Smith and many another, requested the pleasure of their company at all manner of delightful entertainments. Then the Space fellow, after a moment's reflection, remarked:—‘This is very tempting, you know. The cellar of Lord Hydeseek is world-famous: I shall never forget his Château Yquem. Lady Lamprey too has a damned good chef.’

‘To be sure,’ replied the Time fellow, ‘and, taking it all round, the present time, especially now that the season has begun, has much to recommend it. Let us therefore, laying aside for the moment this suicide problem, have much pleasure in accepting these kind invitations.’

And, in the highest spirits, both ran off to dress. But when they gained their bedrooms, each found that the pebble on his mantelpiece had sprouted, and from it bloomed a lily whose colour and perfume enchanted all the room.

V.

The Song of the Bird

THERE WAS ONCE A MAN—THOSE THAT

T knew him said that he was a prophet or a madman or one of these poets—who was haunted by the sweet singing of a bird and spent his days in pursuit of it. And he came to a door in which stood a man who said: 'Yes, the bird is here, I caught her last Friday and have her indoors in a cage. Come and have a look.' And he took him indoors into a small room, and there, in a wire cage, was the bird, hopping to and fro. But when the Seeker came near to have a look at her, the cage fell to pieces before his eyes and became a mere tangle of wire. But the singing filled the room: and, scanning the room for the bird, the Seeker found her perched upon the curtain-pole. But the man of the house was furious and insisted against all evidence that the cage was still intact and the bird in it. Then the Seeker climbed on to a table to catch the bird, but no sooner did he reach out his hand than the room and all the party-walls of the house dissolved surprisingly into dust. And when he had finished sneezing, he heard the bird's song louder still and sweeter in the empty shell of the house.

And when again it seemed that he had caught her, something occurred, and he was dazzled by strong sunshine, and wind and the waving trees were about him, for the house had dissolved as the room had done.

And he ran over the country without cap or Burberry, following the song that sweetened the evenings and the mornings.

Now the people who saw him were amused and repeated with a shrug that he was undoubtedly one of these poets. Others told him that the singing was in his own head, 'and therefore,' they said, 'why worry?' Others again advised a mild aperient. But he packed a bag and pursued his quest, regardless. And after buying

many tickets, he came close upon the bird singing in a myrrh-bush in the far East. But as he stretched out his hand to take her, the whole world went up in a puff of fire and the Seeker floundered up and down among constellations and the hot tails of comets, like a man struggling in deep water: and the universe revolved about him with the whirring of a great machine. But above the whirring, and governing it, the singing soared clear and sweet.

The Seeker, being by this time on his mettle, followed the bird for some thousands of years. But when, at the end of Time and Space, his fingers closed over her, the singing surged up in a huge irresistible tide, and himself and the bird and the whole of creation lost form and melted serenely into the song.

VI.

The Meaning of Life

THREE FLOURISHED ONCE A CERTAIN people who found that the enjoyment of life was much hampered by the problem of its meaning. They therefore resolved to appoint a Royal Commission who, by filtering and analysing all knowledge, should explain the Meaning of Life, so that the matter should be cleared up once for all and everyone should be able to give himself up to unclouded enjoyment.

The Royal Commission got to work with great earnestness of purpose, and they sat and sat. And time went by, and they wore out chair after chair, and trousers after trousers, and spectacles after spectacles, and member after member of the Commission. But the Government, after some unavoidable delay, continued to supply new chairs for broken chairs, new trousers for worn trousers, new spectacles for cracked spectacles, and new members of the Commission for dead members of the Commission.

And every hundred years or so, the Prime Minister of the moment would look in and ask:—‘Well, Gentlemen, and how goes it?’ And the Royal Commission would rise deferentially from their chairs and reply:—‘First rate, thank you, Sir.’ And they continued, year in and year out, comparing, filtering, analysing, condensing, crystallising, plucking away petal after petal from about the golden heart of knowledge. But still the problem of the Meaning of Life weighed upon the people and they could not give themselves up to any enjoyment, knowing that the problem was yet unsolved.

But one day, about ten thousand years after the Commission had begun to sit, the news went out that the problem had been solved, and forthwith the whole nation broke into a dance of

glee. But when they had danced for about a week, the Chairman of the Royal Commission stepped among them and remarked:—‘You would perhaps like to know the answer.’ And the people immediately stopped dancing and replied:—‘To be sure. Of course. Most certainly.’ So a day was appointed on which the Chairman should announce the solution to the people.

And when the day arrived, the people assembled in the market place and the Chairman, followed by all the extant members of the Commission, came solemnly into the midst. And the Chairman said:—

‘Ladies and Gentlemen: during the ten thousand years in which we have sat upon this question, we successfully accumulated every particle of knowledge, printed and unprinted. We then proceeded as it were to boil it all up together. And when it was boiling we skimmed off the inessential scum, and then boiled again and skimmed again until at length, after innumerable boilings and skimmings, there remained but one quintessential drop, the very symbol and ichor of all knowledge. Here, Ladies and Gentlemen,’ he cried, ‘is the symbol of Life’s Meaning,’ and he held up before them a tiny plant flowering in a pot. ‘This,’ he said, ‘is the Veronica Officinalis or Common Speed-well. Those who wish to understand the Meaning of Life have only to contemplate this little plant.’

Now there were a few local poets in the crowd, and these clapped their hands and exclaimed:—‘Precisely. What have we always said?’ But as for the rest of the people, their faces became like the faces of hungry folk who have been served with a rotten egg: and they grumbled aloud.

And the Chairman, seeing that they were dissatisfied, said to them:—‘If anyone is not content with this information, it is open to him to consult the report of the Commission which is now to be had in one hundred and twenty thousand parts, price sixpence a part, or at the reduced rate of £2,750 the set. But I understood that the Commission was appointed precisely with the object of sparing people this labour.’

But the people continued to grumble and growl: and they said:—‘We have been badly, very badly, had.’ And they turned up their noses and resolved unanimously to continue to be weighed down by the problem of Life’s Meaning.

VII.

The Showman & the Marionettes

THE AUDIENCE WAS WAITING AND Mr. Jarvey stood ready. On the stroke of the clock he pulled up the little curtain.

It was indeed a wonderful show. Mr. Jarvey gave them play after play, plays of every kind, comic, romantic, tragic, heroic, and in each the little marionettes moved and spoke with a conviction and a realism which kept the audience spell-bound. They were shown the drama of a little nation suddenly attacked by a powerful foe: its struggles, its loyalty, its heroic sacrifices, and its final victory: and in the closing scene, when the triumphal procession marched into the square in front of the tiny cathedral and the crowd with upstretched arms burst into a pæan of thanksgiving, it was almost impossible not to believe that it was really praising and blessing Mr. Jarvey himself, as he bent, vast and beneficent, over the little box and worked the strings.

Then there was the tragedy of the two little lovers separated by a cruel fate and united only in death: and when in their longing and despair they offered anguished prayers to Heaven, it seemed for all the world as if they were beseeching and imploring Mr. Jarvey himself, who leaned like an impassive and cruel providence above them, guiding them relentlessly towards their tragic dénouement.

When the plays were all finished, the audience crowded round the showman and his box. 'I congratulate you, Mr. Jarvey,' said a lady in the front of the crowd. 'A wonderful show indeed. It is almost impossible to realise that wood, paint, and a little tinsel can be made to express so much.' Mr. Jarvey bowed. 'I am delighted to hear, Madam, that you like the plays. But I ought to

confess, lest I accept credit where no credit is due, that there is no wood or paint in the business.'

'Indeed,' said the lady: 'then papier-mâché perhaps?'

'No, Madam,' replied Mr. Jarvey. 'Merely ordinary flesh and blood.'

'Flesh and blood?' screamed the lady. 'Do you mean to tell me that all those little people were alive?'

'Every one, Madam.'

'And that they bled real blood and died real deaths?'

Mr. Jarvey drew aside the curtain and showed a little corpse still lying on the stage. It had perceptibly changed since the curtain had fallen: the little face had grown green and waxen, the little limbs had stiffened.

'But how horrible, how terrible!' cried the lady. 'To think that we have sat here and applauded real massacres, real agonies, the breaking of real hearts! Mr. Jarvey, you are a monster.'

'But remember, Madam,' answered the showman, 'that I myself made the marionettes.'

'Perhaps. But that is no reason why you should torture them. Why, by simply pulling a string you could have restored that poor little woman's lover to her arms. With that stick of yours you could have swept those invaders off the stage and rescued the three heroes who died to save their country.'

'But remember again, Madam,' said the showman, 'that not only did I make the marionettes but I also wrote the plays they act and taught them the parts they play. When they are perplexed, it is I who am perplexed. When they weep, I weep. When they die in a great cause, some of me dies in a great cause, and some of me, too, is the cause for which they die.'

'I don't understand you, Mr. Jarvey,' answered the lady. 'At any rate it was easy to see that this was no play-acting. The poor little things were in deadly earnest.'

'And so am I,' replied Mr. Jarvey with tears in his eyes, as the lady vanished into the crowd.

VIII.

The Poets & the Housewife

ONCE UPON A TIME, ON A SUMMER'S DAY, two poets, having shut up shop, went out into the country to collect copy, for their stock of this commodity was exhausted.

And they were careful to dress themselves carelessly: and one put on a black collar and black-and-white checked trousers, and the other a cravat of rageing scarlet, 'for,' they thought (though they did not say so) 'we must dress the part.' And their hats were wide and reckless and the hair beneath their hats was like the thatch upon a broad-eaved barn.

And as they journeyed, poking about with their walking-sticks after the precious substance of their quest, there gathered over their heads the devil of a storm.

And at the proper moment the storm burst and the rain came down and the poets left off seeking for copy and huddled under a hawthorn tree. And they appeared as two proud exotic birds, lighted down from the Lord knows where.

And there was a lodge near the hawthorn-tree, and the lodge-keeper's wife looked out and, seeing the two, she exclaimed:— 'Lord, look what the wet brings out!' And the rain increased fearfully.

And after a while she looked out again and the poets were changed, for their bloom was impaired, the rain had clotted their hair, and the scarlet cravat of the one had become crimson from saturation. And rain dripped from all their extremities.

And the lodgekeeper's wife was grieved for them and called out:—'Young men, will you not come in? Why play the heron who stands lugubrious with his feet in cold water when it is open to you to become as sparrows twittering with gladness beneath the eaves?'

But they bowed politely and replied:—‘Thanks awfully, ma’am, but we are poets and we like it.’

And the lodgekeeper’s wife was riled and sneered at them, remarking:—‘They have certainly had a drop too much.’ But they, smiling deprecatingly upon her, responded:—‘Madam, you are pleased to be dry.’ ‘And you,’ quoth she, ‘are pleased to be wet.’ And she slammed-to the window, casting up her eyes and enquiring rhetorically, ‘Did you ever?’ and ‘What next?’

And the rain came down like hell, leaping a foot high and sousing all things.

And after another while the lodgekeeper’s wife looked out again, and the two had gathered closer about the trunk of the hawthorn-tree, and they were as two old crows, for their shoulders were up and their beaks were down and they were unbelievably dishevelled.

And she shouted to them again, for she was a charitable woman, saying:—‘O miserable gentlemen, in the name of civilization and commonsense, come inside.’

But they dared not turn their faces to her, lest the water should run down their necks: so, revolving themselves all of a piece, they replied:—‘Renewed thanks, ma’am, but we are very well, for we are acquiring *copy*.’ And they cowered under the deluge with great earnestness of purpose.

But the lodgekeeper’s wife did not understand the word *copy*, so that she was amazed beyond measure and the power of comment was taken from her.

And the storm, having stormed itself out, abated: and the place was bathed in delicious smells of breathing leaves, and the warm sweetness of hawthorn perfumed the air.

And the lodgekeeper’s wife looked out from the window a fourth and last time, and the poets were in the act of departure. And the tragedy of their appearance was beyond all computing. For the scarlet from the cravat of the one had run down into the bosom of his shirt, so that he was as it were a robin-redbreast. And both were soaked to the uttermost.

And when those poets were returned home, the one found that he had lost a shirt and the other that he had gained a cold. Therefore the one went out and bought a new shirt at seven and six and dear at that, and the other got himself a shilling bottle of Ammoniated Quinine which was tolerably cheap considering.

And the one wrote an ode called *Midsummer Storm* for which he obtained five guineas, so that (deducting fourpence for stamps and seven and six for the shirt) his net profit was four pounds seventeen and twopence.

But the other could only manage a one-guinea sonnet called *Rain among Leaves*, so that (deducting fourpence for stamps and a shilling for the Quinine) his net profit was nineteen and eight-pence.

Thus the two acquired great store of copy (more, indeed, than they bargained for) and the sum of five pounds sixteen shillings and tenpence thrown in.

But the wife of the lodgekeeper knew nothing of all this, so that she still believes, like many another ill-informed person, that poets are nothing more than unpractical dreamers.

IX.

The Poet & the Mandrill

IN A CAGE OUTSIDE THE MONKEY HOUSE at the Zoo there lives the Mandrill, a beast most hideous before, having great protruding fangs and a sour, dishonest countenance: but behind he is lovely as the dawn, a wonder of rose and violet.

And one day there stood before the cage many ladies wearing stays: and there were gentlemen in silk hats, the shoulders of whose coats were padded lest they should appear as the Lord had made them. And the mandrill went to and fro in his cage, and he was very hideous: and anon he turned about, and at once he was very beautiful.

And those that looked at him exclaimed at his ugliness, but of his beauty they said not a word, for, one and all, they were proper persons.

And there came into their midst a poet. And it so happened when the mandrill turned himself backside foremost that the poet's heart leapt within him, and with a loud voice he praised the beauty of those colours, saying, 'Goodness, but how exquisite, to be sure.'

Then all the people gathered about the cage looked wanly upon one another as folk having a secret sorrow: and they all departed in different directions, and the poet and the mandrill were alone.

But the poet, on returning home, wrote a poem in praise of colour, lovely and radiant as a Mexican fire-opal. And the folk who had stood before the cage read the poem and were amazed: but they never knew the source of the inspiration of that poem nor that the poet was he who had grieved them at the Zoo.

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